

Best Dad Ever

How My Kids Introduced Me to God the Father

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Chapter 1: Who is He?

My toddler doesn't trust me. I realize that most experts wouldn't recommend opening a book about fatherhood with honesty like this, but here we are. A few days ago I brought my two-year-old son, Isaac, grocery shopping. For most people it's a boring destination, but kids don't get out much so my son was obnoxiously excited about the trip. Once he heard that he'd be coming with me, Isaac just kept chanting "store, store, store" over and over as I put his shoes and coat on. He scooted down the stairs and headed to the front door, his chanting growing in volume with each step. Lifting my son off the ground we headed to the car, both of us preparing our hearts for the produce aisles that awaited us.

Isaac's mood took a drastic turn once I opened the car door and he realized he'd be sitting once again in his dreaded car seat. He went into full body resistance mode, arching his back and turning sideways to thwart my buckling efforts. I wondered for a minute if maybe he had realized how boring grocery shopping actually is, or if he had possibly paid attention to the first reading at mass the week before and realized the terrifying biblical precedent for beloved sons named Isaac taking trips with their dad. (It didn't help that I was humming "Be Not Afraid" after placing several logs on the boy's back as we walked to the car). Recognizing that my son just hated being strapped in the car seat, I joined his chorus of "store, store, store" until he finally let me buckle him in. Once I started the engine, Isaac was totally content and remained so for the rest of the trip.

It turns out my son just wanted to go to the grocery store, and he saw the car seat as an obstacle rather than the means by which he'd get where he wanted to go. Why wouldn't he just trust me? Had I ever promised an exciting trip to the store and instead brought him for vaccination shots, veggie burgers, or some other equally terrible experience? I kept trying to explain to him that the car seat was the only way he'd get to the store, but naturally he was too young to understand the process and too focused on his frustration to even hear what I was saying. I'm hopeful that at some point, my son will start considering my track record and give me the benefit of the doubt when I promise to bring him somewhere he wants to go.

This has been my life for the past six years since becoming a father; time and time again I keep seeing reminders of the many ways I've second-guessed, suspected, misunderstood, and forgotten how relentlessly loved I am by God the Father. Though I grew up Catholic and would've wagered everything I had if I ever ended up on Jeopardy with Jesus as the final category, I recognize in my life the massive difference between what I intellectually believe and how I respond when life gets tough. As a youth minister and retreat speaker, I had told plenty of people about the love of God, yet there was a part of me convinced that God the Father was a distant figure in my story watching my every move like a police officer with a radar gun.

Throughout my life I have been told that God loves me, but to me it often seemed more likely that loving us, for Him, was like a job He had signed up for a long time ago. I thought of the parents I knew who were committed to jobs they didn't really enjoy, and I figured the Father's love was probably something like this. I was convinced that He kept loving us, me specifically, simply because He wasn't a quitter. I thought that His faithfulness was merely a testament to His perseverance and had nothing to do with any personal affection toward me.

I also fell prey to the notion that I had to earn God's love. Growing up I always did well in school, and for the most part I stayed out of trouble. In time I began to believe that my worth depended on my performance. Whether in my report card, my batting average, my free throw percentage, or simply from other people's reactions to my recycled attempts to be funny, I was convinced that I had to get everything right to be worthy of love.

Another lie that I came to believe was that God's will for my life was a series of tests in which my response would determine whether or not happiness was still possible for me. I know that actions do have consequences and we naturally experience the effects of the decisions that we, and others, make. But for several years, I agonized over every little decision, scared that the wrong choice would send me down a path in which I would always have to settle for less than peace and less than the happiness I desired. When I went through difficult periods or stretches of not feeling content in my

job or my singleness, I would revisit so many past decisions wondering which one was the one to blame for my current situation.

Despite growing up with parents who loved me well and taught me through their words and their lives about God's love, I still struggled to believe that the all-powerful God who holds creation in existence would care about the details of my relatively insignificant life. As a teenager I had a few experiences in prayer that convinced me that Jesus loved me, and my family's involvement in a charismatic community led me to desire and pursue a relationship with the Holy Spirit. Yet God the Father remained a distant character in my story who I feared.

Apparently I'm not the only person who has misunderstood God. As humans, we were created out of the overflowing, eternally creative love of the Trinity. God the Father loves the Son perfectly, the Son loves the Father perfectly, and this eternal love is the person of the Holy Spirit. The Trinity is the perfection of generosity, the perfection of existing and living in relationship with another. God lacks nothing, yet in an act of sheer generosity we are created and invited to share in His life. In the Garden of Eden, Adam woke up in a paradise full of color, light, plants, and animals whose existence all pointed to the staggering generosity of God. Everywhere he looked, Adam couldn't help but be reminded of God's provision and His attention to detail. Made in God's own image and likeness, Adam recognized his desire for love and communion. And so God's generosity continued as He gave Eve to Adam, and Adam to Eve.

God had given Adam and Eve everything they could possibly want, due solely to His goodness and through no efforts of their own, and His only caveat was that they not eat the fruit of one tree in a garden full of other available menu options. Ignoring everything else He had given them, including each other, they fell for the serpent's lie and begin to view God with suspicion. Just one page earlier in Genesis, Adam had been overwhelmed by God's goodness when creation crescendoed with Eve's arrival. All it took was a five minute conversation with a talking snake for Adam to start viewing God as the jealous withholder who lived to prevent Adam's happiness. From the moment of Adam and Eve's sin until today, we've struggled to see God as a loving Father. Pope Saint John Paul II saw this as no coincidence, believing that the enemy's aim in original

sin was directed specifically at our understanding of God's fatherhood. In *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, John Paul II writes:

Original sin attempts, then, to abolish fatherhood, destroying its rays which permeate the created world, placing in doubt the truth about God who is Love and leaving man only with a sense of the master-slave relationship. (228)

Reading it in Scripture, the lie seems so obvious and Adam and Eve's decision to sin seems so irrational. But in all honesty, I'm not that different from Adam. I've spent much of my life suspecting God, convinced that He stood in between me and true freedom. When good things happened in my life, they seemed like random occurrences, and when things didn't go my way, I figured that God's justice had finally caught up to me. Throughout the Old Testament, God the Father continued to fight for His children, battling their enemies and their stubbornness, relentless in His desire to bring them back to the loving relationship with Him that sin had severed.

Thanks to a strong Irish Catholic sense of guilt (thanks, mom) and an illustrated children's Bible replete with images of New Testament folks getting hugs from Jesus while those poor people in the Old Testament scrambled to avoid divinely guided fireballs and lightning bolts, for so long in my mind Jesus was the friendly son of an angry Father. I had a friend growing up whose father always seemed grumpy, so it was common knowledge among our friends that you never wanted to be playing at that friend's house when his dad came home from work at the end of the day. If you happened to be there when the dad arrived, you knew he'd be in a bad mood and you'd probably have to help the friend clean up every area that wasn't meeting his dad's impossibly high standards. I assumed that my friend and his dad were kind of like Jesus and God the Father: the kid was really nice and friendly, but he had to warn us about his angry dad who was never happy to see us. It turns out that even my heresies are unoriginal; this particular error is called Marcionism and it was condemned by the Church when it first appeared in the second century. Marcionists believed that Jesus was God, but that the god found in the Old Testament was a less important, angrier deity whose rules and covenants were all made obsolete by Christ.

This false dichotomy between Jesus and God the Father is contrary to everything Jesus said and did on earth. When Jesus' disciples begged Him to show them the Father, He replied, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:10). Jesus explained that every deed He performed and every word He uttered came from God the Father. Jesus, the Eternal Son, is the full revelation of the Father's love; He is the visible image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15). Because the Divine Persons of the Blessed Trinity never act or exist outside of relationship from one another, we can say with certainty that the Father and the Holy Spirit share the depth of love and compassion for humanity that we see manifest in the life and death of Jesus Christ.

The love and mercy of God is always greater than we could imagine. It would be amazing enough that Jesus reveal to us His intimacy with God the Father, but we are given the incomparable gift of being invited to share in His Sonship. One final insight is found in Jesus' priestly prayer to the Father in the seventeenth chapter of John's Gospel. This text comes from the night before Jesus dies, between the last supper and the arrest at Gethsemane. Unlike most references to Jesus praying in the Gospels, in this instance we are given the words He uses in communicating with His Father. Jesus begs the Father "that the world may know that you sent me, and that *you loved them even as you loved me*" (John 17: 23, italics mine). Read that again, then underline it 10 times, highlight it, and memorize it. The love that God the Father has for us is something akin to the perfect, eternal, indescribable, unfathomable, so-real-it's-the-Holy-Spirit love that the Father has for Jesus. We are loved by the Father like Jesus is loved by the Father. This is unbelievable, and this divine adoption that we receive in baptism is truly a gift beyond words.

When Jesus' disciples asked Him how to pray, He provided both the words and the Holy Spirit that alone can give life to our words (CCC 2766). In the words of the Our Father, the prayer taught by Jesus Himself, we are privileged to call by name the God whose holiness and glory should leave us shuddering in fear. For thousands of years, the name of God was so revered that it wasn't considered reverent enough to even be written down. Yet we get to call Him "Father" and through Christ's suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension, we share in Jesus' inheritance as God's children. The

boldness required in daring to call God “Abba” or “Father” can only come from the Holy Spirit. In baptism we are mystically inserted into the paschal mystery, and through no merit of our own, we are made sons and daughters in the Son. In his letter to the Galatians, Saint Paul reminds followers of Christ that we have been made heirs of the Father. Despite our sin, despite our continued temptation to fall back into old ways, our adoption through baptism means that we are no longer slaves or orphans (Galatians 4:5-7). Jesus invites us to pray boldly, not as beggars asking strangers for spare change, but as children begging their father for what they know he desires to give them. Throughout the Gospels we see the lost and broken running to Jesus, while the leaders and those with well-manicured reputations keep Him at arm’s length. This invitation to relate to God as children to their father is difficult for adults with egos to protect. At the same time, those with nothing left to lose are aware of their need and unhesitating in their cries for mercy. Jesus praises His Father for revealing the Kingdom’s mysteries to the childlike, those souls humble enough to acknowledge their smallness and bold enough to expect God to answer their prayers

Far from serving as a foil character to His angry dad, Jesus constantly revealed through His teaching and public ministry the Father’s compassionate heart for us, His wayward children. In Luke’s Gospel, the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15: 11-32) follows immediately after parables about a lost sheep and a lost coin. For me, reading and praying with this parable puts to rest my previously held suspicions about God the Father. As the parable begins, it seems like Jesus might be simply providing a warning to those who would squander their blessings. The story opens with a father who has two sons, the younger of which asks for an early payout of his inheritance. The nerve of this kid; he essentially tells his dad, “I know I’ll get some money when you die, but I can’t wait that long. Let’s just pretend that you’re dead now. You give me the money and I’ll leave town.” This lack of respect for his father would be offensive today, but it would’ve been unthinkable and unforgivable in a society where fathers were the rulers of their families and where caring for your parents was an essential civic virtue.

Soon after setting off, the son blows through the inheritance “on a life of dissipation.” It’s not as if he made a few poor choices in investments or his business

idea just never took off; he spent the money on bad stuff and it was gone pretty quickly. Having already irreparably separated himself from his family and exhausting his financial resources, things went from terrible to terribler (you might as well just stop reading now if you're one of those people who prefers "worse" to "terribler") when a famine broke out and he needed to eat. He was hired as a pig caregiver, but it's important to know that this story took place well before our enlightened age of doggy daycares, pet psychologists, and cats being pushed around in strollers. At this time in human history, animals were treated like animals. Not only are pigs hygienically dirty, they were also ritually unclean and Jews were forbidden to have any interactions with unclean animals. It wasn't just a problem that this young man was tending the swine; he was hoping to eat from the feeding troughs. Even this didn't work out for him. He was still starving and had run out of options.

In his desperation, the son who had done everything wrong simply remembers how well his father treated the family's employees. Realizing that his reinstatement in the family is impossible because of what he had done, the son begins mentally rehearsing his return home and wondering if his heartfelt apology might lead to his employment in the family's household. So he begins the long journey home. The son had done nothing to earn forgiveness, he had done nothing to prove his contrition, and we are given no indication that his return was motivated by anything other than hunger and desperation.

The audience listening as Jesus told this parable would've likely expected an ending full of justice, an implicit warning for those who waste what they've been given. The son who squandered the inheritance had no one to blame but himself for his decisions. He disrespected his father, he spent all his money chasing after sin, and to top it off, he worked with pigs. No two-sentence apology could possibly make up for all the ways that the son transgressed the moral law, ritual purity laws, and the respect owed to his father. Jesus confounded the audience with the father's reaction:

While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him. His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer

deserve to be called your son.' But his father ordered his servants, 'Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. Then let us celebrate with a feast, because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.' (Luke 15: 20-24)

This story that initially appears to be a cautionary tale about disrespect and hedonism completely changes course in the father's response. Though the prodigal son was solely responsible for the distance between himself and his father, the father makes up the distance by sprinting to his son. The father had every right to be full of harsh words, or even to be emotionally detached from his son who disowned him, and yet he is full of love and compassion for his son. Before any apology is offered, the father embraces the son and kisses him. The son's apology, which he intended to use as a segue into his application for a servant's position in the household, is quickly interrupted by the father's orders to entirely restore the son's place within the family. The son deserves nothing but locked doors and disgust, instead he receives a feast, a robe, and a ring because his father's compassion is incomparable.

We see the heart of God the Father through the father of the prodigal son. The dad had every reason to literally and figuratively shut the door on his son. The fact that the father saw his son while he was still in the distance means that the father must've been looking for his son and waiting each day for his return. In a household with plenty of resources and servants, the father should never have to run. Yet he sprints to embrace his son. The Father's heart beats for us, and He never gives up on us. He doesn't demand perfect motives in our coming to Him; He welcomes us home whether we are returning to Him out of love, or out of desperation and a lack of options. Finally, He doesn't restore us with conditions or on a trial basis. Before the son could offer any reason to be trusted, the father once again opens to him all the doors of the house and all the privileges of being an heir. This is a love beyond all reason; we are forgiven and restored anew like it's the first time, no matter how many times we've run away from home.

God the Father isn't moody, He's not bitter, He's not holding onto grudges. He's patient, kind, and He's everything else we read about love in the thirteenth chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Though we squandered our inheritance on sin and run far in chasing after our fleeting desires, the Father never gave up on us. While we could never adequately apologize or begin to repair the relationship we have broken, God the Father runs to us and embraces our wounded humanity as heaven kissed earth in the person of Jesus Christ. The perfect God took on our frail flesh, uniting Himself to our woundedness and making our suffering His own. The Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, inspires us with the courage to come to our senses and begin our way back to the Father.

Lest anyone take all this talk of God's tenderness as somehow minimizing sin, I believe that a sober understanding of sin's gravity and consequences leads us to further appreciate the Father's love for us. Jesus' preaching and His life proclaimed an urgency to our repentance, because of the fact that the eternal destination of our souls is in the balance and God truly respects our freedom to accept or reject His love. As a loving Father, God's heart must break even more than ours at the possibility of a person rejecting the gift of eternal life. I believe that a healthy concern is good when we recognize the significance of sin and the consequences of our choices, but I'm also convinced that we are less likely to fall for the empty promises offered by temptation to sin when we know how deeply loved we are by a Father who desires to provide for our every need.

Because the Trinity is never divided or separated, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are always present and always at work together. The love between the Divine Persons is so complete and perfect that although they remain distinct, they are never apart from each other. If it sounds easy to understand, then I must be poorly communicating this incredible mystery. The Trinity is the central mystery of the Christian faith, and while we can always grow in our knowledge and understanding of mysteries, we can never plumb the depths or fully grasp every nuance of this reality.

With that said, I'll be speaking primarily of God the Father throughout the book. For many people, the Holy Spirit is difficult to conceptualize. How could a pure Spirit be

a divine person? Every human knows what a father and a son are, so we can at least have some mental picture of God the Father and Jesus, but much well-intentioned Catholic art simply offers us images of birds and little flames when it's time to picture the Holy Spirit. For this reason, it's been said that the Holy Spirit is the "forgotten" Person of the Trinity, but I believe that our current cultural situation has now shifted our amnesia to the person of God the Father.

Chapter 2: Rediscovering the Father's Love

In the world at large, there is a crisis of fatherhood. So many marriages, wives, and children have been abandoned by men unwilling to remain faithful to their call to be husbands and fathers. The effects of abuse, neglect, and emotionally detached fathers rupture our ability to view earthly fatherhood as a window into the fatherhood of God. The term "patriarchy," which literally means the organization of society through the leadership of fathers, has come to be a catch-all for systems of oppression that humanity strives to move beyond. The importance of fatherhood has come to be seen as outdated at best and toxic at worst. Without wading into a debate regarding the positive and negative aspects and examples of patriarchy in history, it is readily apparent that our experiences of fatherhood and male leadership have made it more difficult for people to comprehend God the Father's love for His children. Even for those of us who were raised in loving families, we all grow up with imperfect fathers and can't help but have difficulty grasping the idea of a heavenly Father who loves us perfectly.

After my own experiences of struggling with misconceptions about God the Father and seeing through the teens I worked with just how impactful a father is in a young person's life, I was terrified by the thought of someday becoming a dad. I knew myself well enough to fear that any child I raised would inevitably suffer the effects of my insecurities, my sins, and my selfishness. I knew intellectually that for most children, their first concept of God the Father would be inherently tied to their relationship with their earthly father. Fatherhood to me seemed like a responsibility far beyond my abilities. The reality is that all of us are stuck with imperfect fathers, so we'll all have issues to work through on some levels, but that fact didn't alleviate the anxiety I felt about fatherhood.

I've been incredibly blessed to be raised by parents who love the Lord, who love each other, and who love me and my siblings. My mom and dad are both models for me of commitment to personal prayer and generosity both toward God and toward those in need. Though he would be the first to admit that he's not perfect, my father has always been a loving, ever-present support in my life. Even with holy and loving parents, I ended up with wrong ideas about God the Father. I was convinced that any kid who had

to learn about God from my example would certainly need lots of professional help if they survived to adulthood.

The experience of becoming a father has been healing for me. While my focus initially was on all the ways I'd fall short, time and time again I've been overwhelmed by the reality of the Father's love for me and my children. When asked how to pray, Jesus urged His disciples to pray boldly to the Father in Heaven. He encouraged them with a line that always sounded cruel to me until I had kids: "If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him" (Matthew 7:11). In the past six years of being a father, I've become increasingly aware of my imperfections. My selfishness is on full display at times, and I frequently resist opportunities to be more attentive to my family. In the midst of my brokenness and shortcomings, the Father's incredible provision for us has been so evident. My wife Courtney and I are the proud parents of three children: Elliana (Ellie) is 6, Francis is 4, and Isaac is 2. Their ages are all even, but thanks to my genetic contributions, the kids are all a bit odd. Through my kids, God has begun to tear down my misconceptions and the lies I had come to believe about who He is and what He thinks of me.

About a month ago, our son Isaac came down with a cold. Though we knew it wasn't serious or life-threatening, we went through a week of non-stop coughing and less sleep than I prefer. When I felt like a modern-day martyr for having to spend an hour holding Isaac in the middle of the night, a quick scroll through my Facebook newsfeed helped put my suffering in perspective. Friends and family members of ours are carrying much greater burdens, giving round-the-clock support and attention to babies and children with illnesses or complications that will not simply resolve themselves in a period of a few days. I consider how difficult it is to function when we're worn out from the constant needs of a sick child, and I am amazed to think that there are parents loving and caring for children with special needs for years and decades like this. It is amazing what parents will do for their kids.

Adjusting to life with a baby was my first glimpse of the demands of parenthood. When Ellie was a newborn, we kept wondering if our child would ever outgrow the two

to three consecutive hours of sleep she was getting initially. Our first few trips in the car with her, even though they were only a few miles, had all the excitement of bomb detonation and hostage negotiation. We wondered if she'd ever stop crying, and then once she had, we feared that any change in speed would wake her up from sleeping.

During the first year of Ellie's life, there were several points at which I realized that our life was now drastically different than before she was born. The first few weeks after Ellie was born were a brutal adjustment from our previously carefree living that included lots of sleep to an endlessly repeating cycle of changing, feeding, swaddling, waiting, and cleaning. When our daughter was a few months old, we went with my family to the beach for a weeklong vacation. I was shocked that Ellie woke up early on our second day of vacation. The time she woke up was typical for her, but it was significantly earlier than I would've chosen for a wake-up call on my vacation.

While Ellie quickly became a great sleeper, it didn't come quite as naturally to Francis or Isaac. Many nights required a long period of putting them to bed, with the same books read several times. Then if they woke up during the night, they required another round of soothing them back to sleep and more holding, walking, and rocking. Any parents reading this are shaking their heads in agreement; I realize that Courtney and I aren't the only parents who have ever had to help their kids fall back asleep. I just had no idea before having kids that parenting toddlers required so much work.

Food has been a battleground I never saw coming. I've always loved eating, and for me that's meant eating anything set in front of me. Learning to convince kids to eat healthy foods and being able to guess which food options the kids are most likely to eat is a constantly moving target. I wish I could say we always just tell the kids what we're eating and make them eat it, but we often find ourselves losing willpower battles to Isaac as he finishes another healthy meal solely consisting of tortilla chips. Courtney is much more patient than I am, especially when it comes to the feeding of young humans. She's so good at teaching the kids how to eat with a spoon, while I can't stop thinking about the upcoming cleanup when the kids are learning to feed themselves yogurt.

All of these demands, all of these new responsibilities that came along with raising children, have also been filled with joy. They haven't always been fun, especially

those dreaded “getting kids back to bed” moments in the middle of the night, but we really do love our children and our desire to serve them far outweighs the inconvenience that the moment requires. One of our friends described caring for a newborn as a point in his marriage where he and his wife had never felt more in love and never felt more exhausted. It was a grueling experience that we’d gladly go through again.

Ellie and Francis, ages 6 and 4, have both mastered the art of tired complaining. Especially as bedtime approaches, they’ve become adept at identifying and communicating multiple perceived injustices in our home. Whether they’re complaining about the lack of dessert provided after dinner or crying and whining to convince us of how not tired they are, it’s difficult as a parent to not offer rebuttals when your children are questioning your provision for their needs. We realize that our kids are largely unaware of the efforts that Courtney and I made that day alone to ensure they had everything they needed.

Beyond the daily routine, every aspect of our lives is different since having children. Our priorities, our schedules, the way we spend our weekends and our money, everything changed when we had Ellie. Even when Courtney or I are not in the same place as our children, they remain constantly present in our thoughts and concerns. I’ll never forget the first night I was away from home after Ellie was born. I was speaking at a youth retreat, and honestly I was looking forward to a night of uninterrupted sleep. Of course I didn’t sleep well; I really missed my wife and daughter and couldn’t wait to get back to them. When I was single, I could sleep well almost anywhere; now I have a hard time falling asleep unless I’m in the same house as three children that wake me up multiple times a night.

Becoming a father has radically changed my understanding of love and forgiveness. My earlier understanding of love looked a lot like an auto loan; it was given once a person had proven that they had a trustworthy track record, but it could also be taken away once that person fails to fulfill their duty and proves their unworthiness. But when it comes to my children, I loved them from the moment I was aware of their existence. Long before they could do anything helpful, Courtney and I loved them. They did nothing to earn our love, and no amount of crying or full diapers could lessen their

value in our eyes. Especially in those first months when they're the most helpless and uncoordinated, we are in awe of our kids and madly in love with them. In the midst of our limitations, our exhaustion, our impatience, our short fuses and our broken attempts to love, Courtney and I are overwhelmed with love for each of our children. I can only imagine how much more the Father who loves perfectly must love us.

God's love for us isn't tied to our performance, our production, or even our potential. He fashioned the entire cosmos, He painted every sunset, and still your and my existence makes Him sing for joy. In the book of the prophet Zephaniah, God rebukes His people for their sin and for the ways they've forsaken the covenants. But in the middle of this chastisement, we are reminded of His steadfast love: "The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a mighty savior, Who will rejoice over you with gladness, and renew you in his love, Who will sing joyfully because of you" (Zephaniah 3:17). The same God who sees every part of our past, every secret sin, and every hidden area in our lives, is so in love with us that He can't help but sing about us. We waste so much energy trying to convince others that we're worthy of love while hiding behind our perfectly filtered reputations, convinced that our being known and being loved are mutually exclusive. God our Father isn't impressed by our images or scared by our secrets. He loves us right now, unfinished as we are.

This book is definitely not a manual for how to love your children well. My mom once told me that she'd never read a book about parenting by an author who hadn't navigated the treacherous waters of raising teenagers, so I promise I won't offer any advice. If anything, the stories I'll share speak to my shortcomings and my lack of authority as a parenting expert. I married the most incredible woman I've ever met, and still I take her for granted regularly. We've been blessed with three beautiful children and still I keep checking my phone when I'm at home to see if anything exciting is happening in the world. Despite the many ways that I fall short as a father, I don't have enough words to describe the love I feel for my children. If this is what an imperfect version of love is like, I can't even fathom how great the Father's perfect love must be for us. Throughout the following chapters, I'd like to simply share stories of how God the

Father has revealed His love for me through my children. But first, you've got to hear how I met their mom.

Chapter 3: The God Who Provides

For as long as I can remember, I've wanted to get married. All five of my older siblings married their college sweethearts, so I had no road map for what to do when I didn't even have a girlfriend to go along with my diploma in 2004. I had dated a few girls, but my head and my heart never seemed to agree. Either I fell hard for girls that weren't really that interested in me in the end or my feelings quickly faded when dating girls that I knew possessed so many great qualities and virtues. While in college, I volunteered with local parish youth ministry programs. I loved serving in youth ministry, but I majored in business and planned on pursuing a career in either advertising or finance. I took the typical route toward a career in finance by accepting a junior high youth ministry job right after graduating.

I told myself I would be a youth minister for a year so I wouldn't have to feel guilty about making a lot of money years later when I got a real job. One year turned into 11, but I can't complain because I absolutely loved the opportunity to share the Gospel with young people. I was convinced that God had a perfect plan for the lives of every teen I met, but I wasn't seeing any grand plan coming to fruition in my own life. It was a struggle to keep trying to convince other people that the Lord would provide for their needs when I was still not so sure He was hearing my prayers.

On one hand I thought that maybe I'd find love after achieving some arbitrary combination of sin minimization and holiness maximization, but on the other, I had several friends whose lives seemed much more chaotic and yet were happily married. It was immediately after returning home from the wedding of one of these happy friends that I brought my frustrations and questions to the Lord. I was never one to keep a regular journal, but at a local adoration chapel one night, I decided to write a letter to my future spouse. I wasn't feeling prophetic, or even hopeful, but I saw it as an opportunity to distract myself from the frustration of still being single. Over the next few years I wrote about 20 of these letters, usually during points when relationships or just life in general seemed to hit another detour or dead end.

The letters themselves didn't necessarily fill me with hope, but their existence did help keep me accountable as I hoped to someday give them to my future wife, and I wanted to be living a life that I could proudly write to her about. Despite the growing pile of letters I was accumulating, my love life was no better than before. My life revolved around youth ministry, both running the program at my parish and speaking at retreats and conferences around the country. On the last night of the last retreat of a particularly busy summer, the girl I had been seeing ended things. The next morning, just before heading home, I got a call from one of my roommates that our apartment had flooded. I returned home just in time to grab a bunch of my things and temporarily relocate to my brother's basement. After a nonstop summer of working with high school students, my last few days of freedom before the next school year began were spent camping on the floor belonging to two of my teenage nephews. I was exhausted from the summer, I felt like I was totally spent from trying to serve the Lord in ministry, and yet it seemed like the rewards for my efforts were a heartbreak and water damage.

I laid in bed (specifically the floor that now served as my bed) and silently had it out with God. I expressed my fear that despite my attempts to follow God and to work for Him, He had forgotten about me and my future. It was a one-sided conversation as I vented to God, but then all of a sudden I heard Him clearly speak to my heart: "I'm not done." It was as strange to experience as it is to read about; I had never had my prayer interrupted by God before. Usually He kindly respects my rants, but this time, He spoke clearly (though not audibly, don't worry) and it stopped me mid-lamentation. It was an odd thing to hear, and a bit concerning when I first took it as a threat that He might eliminate even more good things from my life. If nothing else, I was greatly consoled to have heard from God. Even though He offered no clarity, I had no doubt that it was His voice. I knew it couldn't have just been my own wishful thinking that conjured up this phrase, especially because it made no sense in the moment and didn't seem to be what I wanted to hear.

Back to my illustrious youth ministry career. In addition to the enormous salary and status that come along with the position, I also had Fridays off from work. According to the parish business manager and my friends, it also appeared that I took Saturdays through Thursdays off, but I digress. Since I lived close to one of my brothers and his

large family, I was able to spend lots of time with my nieces and nephews. Once in awhile I would pick up the kids from school for my brother and his wife, and the experience helped me grow in humility as I rolled up to the elementary school in my sister-in-law's well used minivan.

Days after my apartment flooded, I was still floor surfing (that's what everyone calls it when you are 27 and subleasing from your 13-year-old nephew) in my brother's basement and had a few vacation days left to burn. With no other plans for the afternoon, or the rest of my life for that matter, I offered to pick the kids up from school. As the kids piled into the van and a stern but fair 9-year old crossing guard informed me that I had violated the school's traffic flow procedures, we exited the parking lot. Just as we made the turn onto the main road, on the school sidewalk I saw the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen in my life. I asked the kids if anyone knew who she was, praying that I wasn't now having a momentary crush on some student's mother. My 10-year old niece Kara told me that this woman was her new math teacher, Miss Ridge. Our conversation regarding the mysterious math teacher ended at that point, despite Kara's claims to the contrary at a wedding reception nearly two years later.

A week later, on my next Friday off, I was at my brother's parish for daily mass. I regularly attended this mass on Fridays because it was both close to my (still wet) apartment and it offered me a chance to see my nieces and nephews as the elementary school students also attended this mass. In defense of my dignity, it's important to state that my habit of attending Friday liturgies at this parish long preceded the arrival of the new math teacher. Occasionally my nieces and nephews would move away from their classes' assigned seats and sit with me when they saw me at mass. On this particular Friday, Kara came over to my pew with a big smile on her face. She whispered to me that she had just told Miss Ridge that I liked her. As one can tell from reading, it was embarrassing and made me look slightly pathetic. The optics were even more disturbing. The church was circular in design, so every pew is facing another set of pews in the circle. With the students taking up the majority of the seats available, the only pews I could choose just happened to be about 180 degrees (directly across) from Courtney Ridge, the now concerned math teacher.

I had no plan or opportunity to introduce myself to Courtney, and certainly no hope for recovery from my new reputation as the creep who uses his niece to set him up on dates when he's not stalking teachers via mass seating charts.

There was no foreseeable opportunity to meet Miss Ridge, and besides, my sister-in-law had heard that Courtney was currently dating someone. About six months later, I ended up meeting Courtney at a young adult retreat, but I didn't know what to say beyond, "Hi, are you Courtney Ridge? I think my niece Kara told you that I like you." That was it. No fireworks, no flowing conversation, and certainly no chance of a smooth next step for me. Courtney was in line for confession and I realized there was no follow up line that could possibly straddle the line between distancing myself from my niece's claim or scaring Courtney with an affirmation of Kara's statement. Having successfully botched our one interaction, I figured that was the end of it. A few months later I got a text from my sister-in-law that Miss Ridge was recently single and open to the possibility of going out on a date with me. It's important to once again establish my credibility in stating that I never requested this setup. My sister-in-law's best friend just so happened to be the school secretary who had recently heard Courtney mention that she was single.

I emailed Courtney at her school email address, asking for her number so I could ask her out to dinner. Knowing that she was a math teacher, I considered including in the email a math problem that she'd have to solve to get my phone number. This idea was problematic because whatever creativity points I might've earned for the equation, the message would essentially have been an extended invitation for her to call me. I decided to opt instead for my usual tactic of overestimating my comedic talent and making several stupid jokes in an introductory email. Thankfully Courtney was willing to settle for less than she deserved; she responded to the email with a division problem I had to solve to get her phone number. We went out four days later and it was great. I found Courtney so attractive, so interesting, and so much fun to spend time with. Every conversation left me more interested in her than before, my tendency to overthink was overwhelmed by my enjoying her company, and my typically fickle heart was set on her. We went on dates, we hung out within our larger friend groups, I met her family and she met mine, and throughout all of these experiences, I couldn't get enough of Courtney.

In August 2011, I was chaperoning a group of students in Madrid for World Youth Day. My prayer intention for the pilgrimage was to seek God's will in my relationship with Courtney. I was fairly sure that I wanted to marry her, but I also knew that my heart wasn't always the most reliable barometer for good decisions. One morning in Madrid, I woke up with a newfound confidence that I wanted to propose to Courtney. A huge group of us waited outside a church to be let in for a catechesis session led by Francis Cardinal George, OMI, and there was a commotion as a van approached the crowded church's entrance. We learned that the relics of St. Therese of Lisieux, the Little Flower, were to be brought in to the church for veneration that day. A few of us were asked to help carry the relics into the church, and I made a deal with St. Therese as we walked in. I didn't know much about St. Therese other than the fact that she was really into flowers and that her feast day is October 1, so I decided that I'd propose to Courtney on October 1st. That gave God, St. Therese, and Courtney almost two months to end the relationship if it wasn't meant to be. Once we sat down, Cardinal George preached to a mostly teenage congregation about marriage, commitment, and love. He spoke so clearly about the necessity to make a commitment with one's life when we've found a love worth living for. I don't know how many of the 15-year-olds in the church that day could relate to what Cardinal George was saying, but I heard it loud and clear.

I returned from the pilgrimage certain that I would propose to Courtney on October 1st, but I really wanted to surprise her. Courtney had never prayed the St. Therese novena, so I suggested that we pray it together starting at the end of September. On the evening of October 1st, 2011, I surprised Courtney in her living room with lots of roses, lots of votive candles that I ~~stole~~ borrowed from my parish's sacristy, and the best words I could find to express my desire to spend my life loving and serving her. That night I also gave Courtney the letters that I had been writing for the past few years, wanting her to know that I'd been waiting years to meet her. Months later we realized that my first letter to my future spouse had been written on October 1, 2007, exactly 4 years to the day before I proposed to Courtney. I thought I had invited St. Therese to be involved in our relationship just two months before the proposal, but I'm now convinced that the Little Flower had been at work all along.

We were married on April 14, 2012, at Holy Family Church in Steubenville, Ohio. It had been a joyful but hectic week leading up to the wedding, full of seating charts, coordinating family events, and 15 million people asking me how I was doing. By the morning of our wedding, I was exhausted. I was certain that I wanted to marry Courtney, I was convinced that God was a fan of our relationship, but I was also wiped out. I knew our families and friends would be coming from far and wide to witness our joy, and more importantly, to be reminded of God's ridiculously generous love for us.

That morning I was able to pray with the priest who married us before the wedding. My prayer was that the joy inside me would be visible on the outside; I didn't want our families and friends to just see the exhaustion in my face. I wanted to be focused on the reality of the sacrament of marriage, not the endless details and plans leading up to the event. I walked up the aisle and waited for Courtney. Both her sisters and mine processed in as bridesmaids, and then she appeared. Courtney was absolutely breathtaking, but that wasn't a surprise because I always found her to be incredibly beautiful. As I first saw her walking toward me, it was like my entire past flashed before my eyes. All my waiting, all my searching, all my asking God "why" or "why not" over the years, it all made sense in that moment. I saw who He had been preparing me for, and I saw in that moment what a great mercy it had been that He had said "no" so many times in the past. I saw what the Lord meant when He told me that He wasn't done just two years earlier, when it seemed like my future and my happiness had been the farthest things from His mind.

The frustrations and questions, the hurts and pains of the past, seemed like nothing at all compared to the joy He gave me in that moment. It wasn't that the Lord simply fixed my past, but He was able to make use of everything Courtney and I had gone through in the past to lead us to that day. I experienced a glimpse of what Saint Paul referred to when he wrote, "For this momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Cor. 4:17). The hurt and loneliness I had felt in the past seemed so insignificant in comparison to the overwhelming reality of God's goodness in my life. The beauty I encountered in that moment was a sharp contrast to the combination of laughing and ugly crying I was experiencing at the same time. With an all-male cast behind me on the altar, there was no one capable to help me

process the emotions I was experiencing. The best these guys could offer me was a tissue. Even Courtney was caught off guard. When she made it to the front of the church, she whispered in my ear, "What are you laughing at?"

As everyone had warned us, the wedding day flew by. The reception was a perfect combination of our families' personalities; my 30 nieces and nephews ran wild the whole night hopped up on candy and limitless soda refills, and Courtney's father unicycled across the dance floor while her brother juggled flaming torches. When we finally drove away from the reception that night, the reality of our marriage began to sink in. For the rest of my life, I was given the vocation to love and be loved by the most incredible, smart, beautiful, and holy woman I had ever met. Seven years later I still can't believe how lucky I am.

Throughout our relationship, the Lord has consistently reminded me that He knows our needs and that He is a loving Father who is willing and able to provide for His children. Looking back now, it's crazy to think that I ever doubted Him. These past seven years of marriage have been incredibly blessed. Our children Ellie and Francis were born in Virginia, where I worked as a parish youth minister and high school theology teacher. Three months after Francis was born, we packed up and moved to a small town in Austria where we now live. I work for Franciscan University of Steubenville's study abroad program, and two years ago we were blessed with another son, Isaac Joseph. Though Isaac was born in Austria, he still proudly cheers for American teams, measures his temperature using Fahrenheit, and refuses to acknowledge soccer as the world's favorite sport.

Chapter 4: Creator

Both Courtney and I turned thirty soon after getting married. We wanted to have kids, and we knew that the window of fertility wouldn't last forever, so we were anxiously hoping that God would bless us with a child as soon as possible. On Memorial Day, 2012, we learned that Courtney was pregnant. I know many couples who prefer to speak of all things parental in the plural, using phrases like "we are pregnant" or "we're having a baby," but that never sounded accurate to me. I learned over the next nine months just how one-sided pregnancy is. Though I also gained weight during this time, it just never felt right that I would share credit for enduring the morning sickness that lasted all day, the dietary restrictions of pregnancy, or the ~~brutal pain~~ joys of birthing a human person.

We both downloaded pregnancy apps on our phones to keep track of every stage of the baby's development. Each week we marveled at the incredible, unseen growth that was happening, and we were so excited to share our good news with our families after a 12-week ultrasound showed a healthy baby. Though everyone we talked to at least pretended to be as excited about our news, we knew that no one was nearly as fixated as we were in the minute details of each progressive week of the baby's growth in utero. We were excited to meet this kid, whoever they would turn out to be, but I was secretly hoping for a boy. Knowing that I don't always say the right things, I figured having a boy first would allow me some leeway in learning how to be a better parent. I reasoned that if we had a girl and she had to grow up with a dad who typically speaks before thinking, she'd be more likely to resent me and have major father wounds as a result. If we had a boy first, his genetic lack of an attention span would mercifully protect him from listening to anything that I said.

About four months into the pregnancy, we learned that we, I mean Courtney, would be having a baby girl. I quickly got over my fear of scarring a daughter when I started planning a way that I could master sign language (or at least learn to mime) as an alternative to speaking during the formative years of my daughter's life. We picked the name Elliana Therese, but we kept the name a secret from everyone until she was born.

We decided to withhold Ellie's name because we figured that well-meaning friends and family members could only ruin the name we had chosen with their stories of deranged criminals they knew who shared the name. Once we found out we were having a girl, it made the reality of the baby so much more personal. Instead of referring vaguely to our baby, we knew that it was Ellie who we were preparing for and planning to love. With all the researching we did in anticipation of Ellie's arrival, it still seemed miraculous that our love had created another life. Courtney was relentless in her constant searching for the best approaches to motherhood, ranging from the foods she omitted to the labor and baby care classes we attended together. We prayed for Ellie, we talked to her, and she became a constant topic in our conversations, our hearts, and our minds. As Courtney's baby bump grew in the following months, Ellie's existence became more and more of a concrete reality to me.

Thanks to the incredible way God made my wife, her body was able to work around the clock to nourish and grow our daughter. Courtney and I couldn't get enough information about each stage of Ellie's growth in utero, and we marveled at how perfectly God was at work in Courtney, intricately forming our daughter. From the formation of eyelids to the loss of the weird tail that babies have pretty early on in the pregnancy, Courtney and I all of a sudden became obsessed with studying fetal development. We kept researching to learn as much as we could about Ellie's growth and milestones for each week of the pregnancy, and still all the information in the world couldn't quite prepare me for the reality of seeing our little girl for the first time.

On Ellie's due date we went to the doctor for a routine checkup. The doctor thought that our daughter would be making her grand entrance (technically it's more of an exit I guess) within the next 24 hours, so I took the next few days off from work as we completed every last task we could think of and anxiously waited. Once we got home from the doctor's office, we packed our bags and set up our car seat for the eventual ride home from the hospital. Courtney even made cupcakes for the nurses and doctors who would help her with delivery. Those cupcakes sat on our kitchen counter for the next four days as Ellie patiently waited to make her appearance.

Early in the morning of February 10, Courtney woke me up to let me know that her water had broken and that labor had begun. As any competent father would, I proceeded to eat as much food as I could to carb load before we headed to the hospital. The labor process itself turned out to be different than the experience that countless sitcom birthing episodes had prepared us for. Labor took longer than five minutes and not once did Courtney scream at me.

As labor intensified, the doctor positioned me to one side of Courtney while a nurse stood on the other side during the contractions. I started to feel faint, but I also felt a bit embarrassed by my inability to even watch as my wife pushed a baby human out. I figured I'd take a break for a minute, so I walked to the bathroom to splash water on my face and collect myself. The nurse noticed my face becoming pale; she ordered me to sit down and eat so I wouldn't pass out. Until this point in my life, I thought of myself as relatively strong, or at least not so weak that I couldn't even manage to watch other people do difficult things. I certainly wasn't feeling so brave when the doctor walked back in to check on Courtney's progress and found me sitting on a recliner, chugging apple juice and eating graham crackers. Somehow my wife was dominating the labor process and I was struggling to keep my juice down. Like all valiant heroes, I managed to rise from my cracker crumb stained reclining seat to regain my place beside Courtney as ~~we together~~ she gave birth to Ellie.

I couldn't believe it; we'd finally meet this baby we'd spent nine months praying for, hoping for, and waiting for. For all the years Courtney and I had individually dreamed of one day becoming parents, here in the flesh was a child born from the goodness of God and our love. I trembled as I held Ellie in my arms for the first time, terrified at the realization of how unworthy I was to hold this precious gift. As much as I had struggled with restlessness and distraction for as long as I could remember, all that mattered in my life that day was there beside me in that hospital room. The next two days in the hospital were full of learning everything we could about how to care for Ellie. From the art of efficient diaper changes to the science of swaddling, we felt so underprepared as parents, but we couldn't wait to learn how to love and care for our little girl.

Hours after Ellie was born, my parents came to the hospital to meet their newest grandchild. When my mom walked into the room, my first reaction was to apologize to her for all the times I had doubted her love and concern when I was growing up. After seeing what Courtney went through to bring Ellie into the world, and then learning over the next few weeks what it would entail to care for a newborn, I gained a lot of appreciation for my parents.

Having worked with so many teenagers over the years as a youth minister, I've heard so many young people question their worth and their value. Even for kids who grow up in loving homes with great parents, it's a sad but normal reality that most people wonder at some point if they're loved or even worthy of love. It was scary to hold our daughter as a baby and realize that she'll likely struggle with these same questions one day. Ellie is literally the product of love and proof of God's incredible goodness to us; she's the answer to our prayers and a miraculous gift of grace and nature. Holding her as a newborn, Courtney and I could both say honestly that we had been waiting our whole lives to meet her. Six years later, we still marvel at the gift of Ellie and we're still amazed that she's been given to us to love and care for. Meeting our son Francis, and then Isaac two years later, Courtney and I experience each child as a gradually revealed gift with their unique personalities and the irreplaceable difference that each of them makes in our family.

Finding myself helplessly in love with each of my children has taught me so much about God the Father's love for me. Courtney and I loved our kids even before they were born, simply because they were ours. Our children belong to us, not as property that we own, but as a part of our family, our lives, and our hearts that we can never stop thinking about. Each child's existence alone was reason enough to love them, though they had accomplished nothing nor given us anything. It's ironic that during the moments and phases demanding the most from parents, children are either asleep or simply too young to be aware. When the relationship between parents and children is the most one-sided and the efforts required of parents are the most demanding, the kids have no idea what's going on.

Even with the round-the-clock needs of small children, Courtney and I realize that we have it relatively easy in comparison to the heroic witness of those parents whose children require constant care and assistance for the entirety of their lives.

It's funny to see the blank stares and clueless smiles in the faces of babies as parents tell them repeatedly how loved they are. I'm beginning to realize that no matter how old our children are, they'll never fully grasp how much we love them or the lengths we go to in caring for them. Infinitely more than we are attentive to the needs of our children, God the Father knows and cares for us. For every single thing we're aware of and grateful for, there are a million other ways that we are loved and provided for by our Father. Just as our love as parents for our children is far greater than their capacity to understand love, I'm convinced that there must be an even wider gap between God's love for us and our ability to comprehend His love.

In his inaugural papal homily, Pope Benedict XVI stated, "We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution. Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary." What a profound reality; every individual is created and willed by the mind of God Himself. The Psalmist praises God's omniscience and the intricacy of His design in creating us: "You formed my inmost being; you knit me in my mother's womb (Psalm 139:13)." As technology advances, we become increasingly aware of the precision required for the development of unborn life. At the same time, our faith tells us that the creation of an individual is no mere biological process. No matter the circumstances surrounding our conception or the relationship between our parents, we are not an afterthought or a scientific result. In college I took a class on embryology; fifteen years later I distinctly remember one of the professor's lectures about the statistics of human life. Given the millions of possible eggs from the mother and the hundreds of billions of sperm cells from the father, it's an understatement to say there are a lot of possible combinations. Add the challenges and threats involved throughout a pregnancy, and you realize that every living person has beat incredible odds simply by being born. Yet our children are so much more than lottery-winning combinations of Courtney's and my genes. My wife and I are constantly amazed by new facets of the kids' personalities we discover as they

grow up; we see both glimpses of each other and completely unique gifts and traits in each of our children. In the mind of God, we are not consequences, rather we are unique creations fashioned with as much love and attention as when Adam and Eve were formed in the beginning.

The Church teaches that humans are unique in the cosmos as the only creatures willed into being for our own sake. We are in awe of natural beauty; we are overwhelmed by sunsets and canyons. We marvel at the wild artistry of God on display in the Northern Lights or His unfathomable creativity as we gaze into the vastness of the Milky Way Galaxy, humbled to discover that it is only one galaxy among billions. We are told that massive natural structures like the Grand Canyon were carved and formed over millions of years, and yet none of these beautiful things were made for their own sake. No sunrise, no star, no galaxy can hold a candle to the dignity of a single person. Because we were made in His likeness and image, I am convinced that God the Father put more thought into forming the contours of each of our hearts than He did in sculpting the Grand Canyon or spinning the stars into orbit.

As a first-time father of a newborn, I loved every single thing that I knew about Ellie. I loved the way she smelled, I loved the weird way her pinkie toes naturally curled under the other toes next to them, and I loved the way she inhaled for a half-second before each cry. Especially in those first few weeks after she was born, our eyes were always on Ellie and our schedule revolved around caring for her. We worried that she wasn't sleeping enough, then freaked out when she did sleep longer than two hours. Our poor daughter had to be scarred from the amount of times we'd get really close to her face to listen for her breathing as she slept.

When Ellie cried, we learned quickly that it was usually due to an empty stomach or a full diaper. I wasn't much help in the nursing department, but I eventually got good at changing diapers. Even the apparently simple task of diaper changing was a learning process for me; for the first few weeks after Ellie was born, I would get so stressed out when she cried. I would try to calm her down by saying, "It's okay, it's okay, it's okay" on repeat, my anxiety showing as I kept getting louder in my declarations of just how fine

everything was. I was anxious because I urgently wanted to do whatever I could to make my tiny daughter happy again.

Ellie's comfort was what mattered most in our lives during those first few months. We tried different blanket textures, we argued over the ideal water temperature for her baths, and we sang and hummed a never-ending loop of the only three baby songs we knew to calm her down when she was upset. It was difficult but there was never a doubt or a hesitation in our minds; we loved Ellie with everything we had and would stop at nothing to care for her.

God the Father knows every hair on our head, every passing thought, and every fear and desire in the depths of our hearts. He doesn't simply tolerate our quirks or our weaknesses, He is madly in love with us through and through. He is not stressed out by what hurts us, He's not surprised by our wants or overwhelmed by our demands. He's not struggling to figure out what we need; He knows us personally and intimately. Courtney and I kept our eyes on Ellie while she slept partly because we weren't sure what to do next, but the Father knows well what's coming up and He still keeps watch over us. We waited nine months for Ellie to be born, but God knew from before all eternity that our daughter would exist. And He rejoices over our existence more than first time parents rejoice over their children.

Although He's created the billions of people alive today, and each person that came before us, God the Father calls us precious in His sight (Isaiah 43:4). He doesn't view me as just one person among many. Saint Augustine went so far as to say that the Lord cares for each individual person as if we were the only one in existence. More than Courtney and I desired to meet and hold our daughter Ellie, the Father desires to be in relationship with us. God is great enough to fashion billions of people on one planet in a cosmos containing billions of galaxies, yet for some reason my existence affects Him. Even in our apparent insignificance, the God of the universe finds us eternally significant.

Chapter 5: Agape, Eros, and Crying Babies

For as long as I can remember, I've been good at sleeping. Usually within a few seconds of trying, I can reach full snore. I'm so good at it that the presence of a bed isn't even necessary for me to pass out. When I was younger, I would be excited to have friends sleep over at my house. These nights always started out well, but inevitably I'd be sound asleep on the living room floor early enough in the evening that my friends would be stuck watching some boring news show with my parents. To this day I fall asleep just about every time I sit down in a movie theater. It doesn't matter how exciting the movie is or how early in the day it is. Shortly after getting married, Courtney and I went to see one of the Hunger Games films in an IMAX theater. It was the most expensive nap I've ever taken, and Courtney was embarrassed because in my sleep I had ended up resting my head against some poor kid sitting next to me.

As an extremely talented sleeper, I wasn't much help at first when Ellie would wake up during the night. Fortunately my wife was always more than willing to notify me of opportunities to help care for our children in the middle of the night. This was a steep learning curve as we adjusted to having our first baby. Ellie was born with jaundice and we needed to make sure she was awake and eating every 2-3 hours for the first few weeks. Of course I was still mostly asleep as I stumbled around the bedroom looking for a diaper and forgetting why I was awake in the first place. Fortunately Courtney was also willing to repeatedly remind me where the diapers and the baby were located in the room.

Over time we became more efficient, Ellie was able to sleep a bit longer, and we adjusted to the new definition of a good night's rest. The addition of Francis and then Isaac definitely require more work, but for Courtney and I, the biggest game-changer was going from zero kids and uninterrupted sleep to having a child who needed us to be constantly available. The first few months with each baby have felt like we're in survival mode, but at the same time there is this real sense of accomplishment each time we successfully care for their needs. When the kids are babies, it's nice because their biggest struggles can usually be solved by feeding or changing them. I'm told that

teenagers' problems are a little bit harder to manage, but we've still got plenty of time before we have to deal with that adventure.

On any given night, at least one of the kids will usually wake us up. Sometimes one of them will yell for one of us and then pass out again, and sometimes they wake up disoriented and need help getting back to sleep. Despite the inconvenience of the timing in the middle of the night, soothing the kids and helping them fall back asleep often provides a good story for the next day. Kids are weird, and they obsess about weird things. For Ellie, that means that she'll occasionally wake up crying because she's convinced that one of her stuffed animals (which fell off the bed) has come to life and run away with no plan of returning. Francis will frequently wake up with questions about his Lego collection or hypothetical death match scenarios between ninjas, knights, sharks, and lions. Isaac just wakes up at 2 A.M. ready for the day and offended by our attempts to convince him to return to bed.

When they're newborns, it seems like we're constantly trying to get our children back to sleep. We (initially it was just Courtney but now I've been trained as well) wake up once we hear them cry and quickly attend to their needs. We learned quickly that the reality of life with a newborn isn't nearly as romantic as it's portrayed by every parent whose kids are no longer newborns. Soon after Ellie was born, we had several friends with adult children tell us how magical their kids were as babies. We felt like maybe we had ended up with a different model of baby than our friends, because we were barely surviving and constantly exhausted. Courtney and I would complain to each other about the sleep deprivation and imagine how great it would be when the baby started sleeping longer. Eventually the kid would start sleeping through the night, and for a week or two, life was amazing and I had so much more energy thanks to the additional sleep.

Soon after we rediscovered what it feels like to sleep for a whole night, the strangest thing happened. I missed the kids crying out for us and looked forward to soothing them again. When they finally do wake up in the morning now, we run to them like they're friends we haven't seen in a long time. I'd like to chalk up these rare restful nights to God's goodness but it's more likely that just the night before we were sternly warning one of the kids (I want to keep this anonymous to respect my children's privacy,

so we'll just call the guilty party "Francisco") of the consequences he'd face if he kept yelling or kept getting out of bed to tell us something.

The wide world of whining and the science of childhood cry classifications were foreign to me before Ellie was born. I had certainly been around unhappy kids before, but I was always a set of earbuds or a closed door away from audial serenity. When a niece or nephew that I was holding would start crying, I could simply hand them back to their parents. Before Ellie, I had no idea what to do with a crying kid and no desire to learn. Everything changed when it was my own baby crying. I'd stay up for hours walking Ellie around, trying out dozens of positions, holds, and lullabies to calm her. Despite my previous aversion to crying babies, it surprised me how much I desired to hold my daughter when she was upset. I knew that my newfound concern was simply a product of becoming a father and not due to any natural disposition or virtue of mine.

Eventually with each child, we've learned to distinguish between the meaning of their different cries. For example, there's usually a difference between the cry of a kid still half asleep versus the kid that just fell out of bed. Obviously the falling out of bed variety is usually accompanied by a loud thud confirming the cause of the crying, but you do learn to recognize the ways that the baby's cries communicate different things. Now with multiple children to choose from, we can usually identify which kid is crying even if we can barely hear them through the walls. My insensitive ears have become attuned to hear my kids cry and I have an idea of what they need based on the noise they're making. Courtney's hearing is incredible; I'm fairly certain she uses sonar to determine the exact scenario that led to the crying as well as the relative guilt or innocence of each child involved.

When Courtney and I are with other families, it's amazing how we can notice the difference between cries coming from our kids and those coming from other children. We've heard our children cry enough to recognize the unique tone and pitch of each kid's cries. Upon hearing the cry, all parents present will pause and tense up for a second, preparing to run to their child in need. Fairly quickly we'll realize whether the crier belongs to our family or not. It's a momentary relief to realize that it's not your kid in pain, but in those cases the odds are high that one of our children caused the injury.

Thanks to their refined consciences and their desire for each other's holiness, Ellie and Francis are always willing to tell us when the other person has done something wrong.

While Ellie and Francis are quick to explain what they're upset about, Isaac simply cries until we fix the problem. Even as Isaac becomes more verbal, he still communicates largely through gestures and cries. Babies don't waste time explaining themselves. Their needs are usually fairly predictable, and besides, infants don't know how to talk. Isaac's inability to communicate the story behind why he's upset never hinders us from running to hold him. I know that he doesn't need an explanation or a five-step plan toward inner peace, he first needs to be held and reminded that I'm with him and that I love him. He usually also needs a diaper change, but that's secondary.

Courtney and I don't run to our crying children primarily because of our obligation as parents, we do it because we love them and it wounds our hearts to see them hurting. Often when I reach out to God in times of need, I attempt to communicate with Him as if He is unaware of the details of my life. I try to explain my situation to Him and then usually try to come up with my own solutions to my problems. I pridefully resist simply calling out for Him, convinced that He'd be annoyed with my weakness. I look for answers to my questions rather than holding onto the Father who first desires to hold me and affirm His love for me.

Pope Benedict XVI wrote beautifully about the interplay of eros and agape within God's love for us in his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est* (God is love). Though we easily recognize the self-donating love of agape in God's lowering Himself to love us, the prophets also speak boldly of God's driven and passionate love for us (DCE, 9). God the Father doesn't just love us because He feels bad for us, He somehow desires us and pursues our hearts because we are lovely to Him. Though I like to think of myself as a grown man relating to God, my fears of His disapproval of my neediness are childish. At every stage in life, it's a natural God-given human desire to be known, seen, and loved. The prophet Isaiah reminds us that God holds us in His mind and His heart more than a pregnant mother remains aware of the child within her womb (Isaiah 49:5). No matter the reason for their crying or the amount of times they've cried before, as a father I can't help but run to my little ones when they're hurting. No matter how grown

up we feel or how complicated our problems seem to us, we have a Father who knows us intimately and rushes to hold us if we are just willing to cry out to Him in our need.

Throughout Scripture we are given glimpses into the Father's heart for His children. The story of the Exodus famously involves plagues, miracles, and an angel of death. But the motivating factor behind all of the wild scenes from the story is God's passionate love for His chosen people. When God first speaks to Moses, He introduces Himself and reminds Moses of the covenants and promises He made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Before any part of the plan is announced, the Lord tells Moses that He has seen the people suffering and heard their cries (Exodus 3:6-7). The plagues, the splitting of the Red Sea, and the signs and wonders God works are simply His response to the cries of His children. God isn't deaf to our cries or distant from our prayers, He is constantly drawing closer to us and working on our behalf.

In Mark's Gospel, right before Jesus feeds five thousand with a few loaves and fish, we are given a short but powerful glimpse into His sacred heart. When Jesus sees the crowd of people gathering from all over to be near Him, we are told that "his heart was moved with pity for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd" (Mark 6:34). The same God who set the universe in motion, the Unmoved Mover who is eternally powerful and lacks nothing, has a heart that is moved by love for His children. It is not enough for the Father to love us from afar or to respond in writing to our questions, He sent His only Son to live among us and to enter into the depths of our suffering. Humanity waited thousands of years for the fulfillment of the Father's promises, and all creation held its breath awaiting God's response as the eternal Son of God became one of us. The silence that night in Bethlehem was broken by the Father's response to a world desperately in need of salvation. Before the Sermon on the Mount, before the Our Father or any parables, the first thing that the world heard from God was a cry that sounded just like ours. In taking on our flesh, Jesus fully entered into our humanity and embraced our hurts and our suffering. Our cries have not gone unheard; we have a Father who is propelled by love to rescue us from all that ails us, especially the self-inflicted wounds of sin.

Chapter 6: Sin and Diapers

It amazes me how different each of our kids is from their siblings. We believed that each child would be unique and unrepeatable and all that stuff they tell you about when you're cutting out paper snowflakes in Catholic elementary schools, but we had no idea how little of our experience with Ellie would prepare us for Francis or later for Isaac. From their attitudes about wearing hats to the specific rituals demanded for their bedtime routine, almost nothing has been the same from one kid to the next. One of the differences we noticed early on was the kids' attitude regarding a certain digestive event.

Ellie has always been a refined young lady. If we were out of the house when she was a baby, she simply wouldn't poop. The one exception she'd allow for was extended trips of more than three days, because everyone has their limits. When we were at home, she would only poop if everything was calm and quiet. Francis, on the other hand, has always been very relaxed. Not even the uncomfortable position posed by his car seat could prevent him from doing his business exactly when he felt like it. Isaac's fecal philosophy falls somewhere between Ellie and Francis, but he definitely makes the cutest "pushing" face of our three children.

Given all of the differences between our children during the diaper years, they all had one thing in common. All of them would avoid Courtney and I after they pooped. If the now relieved child was on the other side of the room, they'd waddle away as fast as their pants' contents would allow. They'd swat our hands away as we reached out to grab them, try to kick us when we finally got them on the ground for the diaper change, and then attempt to roll themselves to either side once we had fully committed to the change, their full but open diaper rocking back and forth.

In fairness to the kids, I haven't exactly had a perfect record of infant care. I blame my brother Don, his wife Linda, and their extremely communicative two-year-old son. Don and Linda asked me to babysit their son, Donny, when I was 11. Because I come from a large family, people sometimes expect me to possess those great skills and virtues acquired in a household where everyone helps. I am nine years younger

than my closest sibling, so I never really got to learn those important lessons about sharing, generosity, childcare, and pretending to care about other people. My brother and his wife should've known better, but they knew I loved spending time with my nephews and nieces, so they asked me to babysit.

Donny didn't just have a big vocabulary for a toddler, he was also incredibly thoughtful. I remember one conversation we had when he was like 4; he was asking me deep life questions and even asking good follow up questions. It's important to establish the impressiveness of my nephew's maturity as it'll help salvage my defense later in the story. For the most part, the babysitting adventure went well. I was watching a few kids that evening, and all of them but one had a wonderful time. The problem started when Donny told me that he had pooped in his diaper. I knew what the desired outcome of a diaper change was, but the mechanics eluded me. He must've been able to read the hesitation on my face, because before I could decide on a plan to fix the problem, Donny proceeded to tell me that he could change his own diaper.

I realize how ridiculous this sounds now that I say it out loud, but please keep in mind that Donny was really good at talking. Sure, maybe I could've intuited that a kid who still needs to wear a diaper probably isn't capable of cleaning himself, disposing of the old diaper, and throwing on a new one. Respecting his privacy and forsaking my responsibilities, I left Donny in the bathroom with a new diaper and a pack of wipes to get the job done. I closed the door and went to the other room to keep an eye on the other kids. After about 10 minutes I returned to check on Donny. I don't know what I was expecting to see, but the crime scene was worse than I can describe. Apparently his expanded vocabulary wasn't enough to prevent him from repainting the floors brown.

As a youth minister, I had the privilege of encouraging teens as they grew in their relationship with the Lord. It's an amazing gift to have a front row seat to see God drawing someone closer to Himself, to see the transformation that happens when people encounter the love of God and surrender more and more of their lives to Him. When teenagers would ask questions about God's mercy, I was thoroughly convinced that the Lord could easily heal their sin and that they had no reason not to approach His mercy in the sacrament of confession. At the same time, I struggled with a lingering fear

that my own sin was different. It wasn't like I was leading a double life and spending my weekends on wild sin rampages, but I felt shame in the fact that I still sinned regularly despite the fact that I should know better. I had no excuse; I knew the faith and still I struggled with habitual sin, so often falling short of loving God and others.

I feared that God the Father's attitude toward me was one of constant disappointment. He had given me such an easy life, and yet I kept screwing up. I knew He could forgive my sin, but I figured that He must be growing tired of my repeated failures and my inability to get my act together. I would approach the sacrament of confession regularly, but I still believed that overcoming sin was a task that was mostly up to me to accomplish. Dealing with my kids' diapers has completely changed my understanding of my sin and the Father's mercy.

As their father, I know that my children are going to poop just about every day. I'm ready to deal with it and happy to help rid them of the excess baggage. Any delay or avoidance in letting me change them only adds to the mess. Their pretending that they haven't pooped does nothing to distract me from the smell and the new way of walking that they're forced to adopt. Like I learned with my nephew, there's no chance that kids in diapers can deal with their own messes. Over time, Donny's attempts to fix the problem without my intervention just added to the problem. One of our responsibilities as parents is dealing with diapers, and we're happy to do it. I love my kids and I'll chase them down if I have to so that I can get rid of the mess.

While the effects of sin are much greater than the inconvenience of bowel movements, the significance of our sin pales in comparison to the greatness of the Father's mercy and love for us. God the Father is not disgusted by us. As Pope Francis reminds us in *Evangelii Gaudium*, "God never tires of forgiving us; we are the ones who tire of seeking his mercy," The Catechism of the Catholic Church illustrates the irrational progression of sin and the Father's loving response:

Man may forget his Creator or hide far from his face; he may run after idols or accuse the deity of having abandoned him; yet the living and true God tirelessly calls each person to that mysterious encounter known as prayer. (2567)

First we forget who God is or we feel ashamed of our sin so we hide from Him. Still we can't escape our desire for communion and happiness, so we look everywhere else for connection and meaning. After our running away from God, we accuse Him of having abandoned us. What a good Father we have whose pursuit of us is tireless. Despite the fact that I am the one that runs away from God, He still pursues me. Despite my ridiculous accusations and my baseless questioning of the Father's concern for me, He loves me too much to leave me alone in my sin and shame.

The sacrament of confession is a beautiful moment of encounter where the ugliness of our sin meets the glory of God's mercy. Going to confession sometimes feels like a Herculean effort for us, but in reality it is God who does the vast majority of the work. In Pope Benedict XVI's book *Jesus of Nazareth (Holy Week)*, he presents Christ washing the disciple's feet as an image of the sacrament of reconciliation: "In confession, the Lord washes our soiled feet over and over again and prepares us for table fellowship with him" (74). Jesus himself takes the places of the lowest servant, bending down with a towel and a basin to wash the feet of His disciples. Saint Peter was understandably scandalized by the humility of Christ and this reversal of roles, as the perfect Son of God chose to clean the feet of men who would within hours deny even knowing Him. In Jesus washing the feet of His followers, we see an icon of the incarnation. Though He was the perfect Son of God, Jesus emptied Himself to cleanse us from the stain of sin and to reconcile us with the Father.

Throughout salvation history, God the Father slowly unveiled the extravagance of His love for us. In the person of Jesus Christ, we see the full revelation of the Father's love for His wayward children. Jesus hinted at the depths of the Father's love in His preaching and His life. Through Jesus' suffering and death, He embodied the totality of the Father's generosity. The parable of the lost sheep, presented in Matthew's gospel, illuminates the revolutionary economy of grace.

What is your opinion? If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them goes astray, will he not leave the ninety-nine in the hills and go in search of the stray? And if he finds it, amen, I say to you, he rejoices more over it than over the

ninety-nine that did not stray. In just the same way, it is not the will of your heavenly Father that one of these little ones be lost. (Mt. 18:12-14)

Any sensible person would recognize the marginal value of one lost sheep relative to 99 obedient lambs. In strictly economic terms, the lost sheep isn't worth the effort. It's just one sheep, and a shepherd with a large flock could easily replace a few losses every season. Thankfully the Father is no ordinary shepherd, and He doesn't just see an individual as one sheep among billions. He loves us perfectly and personally; there is no price that He wouldn't pay to redeem us. No one else could replace you or I; our existence and our well-being matters to God. Not only does He pursue us to the ends of the earth when we stray, but He rejoices when we are found. No matter the reason for our being lost, whether it was entirely our fault or not, God will stop at nothing to rescue us.

Chapter 7: So Many Rules

It's never been clear to me exactly when kids are old enough to have a rational discussion about our family policies, procedures, and general expectations for living in our home. I've often found myself in the middle of a long conversation with Isaac, trying to find a solution regarding his inability to distinguish the difference between food and dirt. Courtney's stopped me several times as I try to discuss with babies their need to possess better self-control. She is so much better than me about having reasonable expectations for what our kids are capable of at each stage in their development. One of the adventures of parenting has been figuring out with Courtney how we'll enforce rules and which rules matter the most to us. We constantly feel like we're figuring out how to deal with each situation as it comes, and for now we're just grateful that we've got several years before we have any teenagers under our roof.

Because the world around us, including our kitchen, is full of possible dangers, it's been so important that we both teach the children about rules and find ways to reinforce those rules. The reinforcement of the rules has been the biggest challenge as we keep struggling to find the best way to show the children negative consequences for rule-breaking in a way that still respects their personal dignity. When our kids are babies, most of our enforcement comes by way of quickly moving the little one away from the situation or item we want them to avoid. As the kids get older we're able to begin to have conversations with them about the rules. We still have so much to learn in determining how to communicate our expectations differently to kids at different developmental stages with different personalities. What worked for Ellie when she was three won't necessarily work for Francis at the same age, and Isaac is likely to be different than both of his older siblings when he turns three. It's been a frustrating realization that the lessons we learn with our first child don't all translate to the next one; we need to learn how to best communicate with each kid and how to adjust and adapt as they grow up.

Through my exasperated attempts to debate with toddlers, I've come to realize that many of our rules just don't make sense to them. Even rules that are obvious to adults seem cruelly unfair to little kids. When Ellie first learned to ride a bike, she was shocked to find out that we were opposed to her riding across the street. It's important to know that the street in question is a major road with a high speed limit, a blind curve, and plenty of traffic all day long. But to Ellie all that mattered was that she was capable of riding her bike, so our rule came across to her as our doubting her biking abilities. Despite our attempts to explain the logic, she couldn't see the reasoning, and we had to frequently take the bike from her until we had all walked across the road and she could resume riding on the sidewalk.

Isaac has been blessed with an incredibly strong stomach. As the third kid, our inability to watch his every move has been a scary combination with his desire to eat everything that he can fit in his mouth. He and I have had several heartfelt conversations prompted by him eating some nonfood item he found around the house, yet each of these conversations ends with him laughing in my face. No matter how persuasively I argue or how thoroughly I explain the potential dangers to him, Isaac remains blissfully unaware of the threat posed by his taste for Legos, wood chips, and marbles.

Francis is cursed with his father's impulsivity. He responds to situations fairly dramatically, and I see many of my own struggles in his reactions. Attempts to share toys with Ellie sometimes ends in Francis throwing himself on the couch and yelling "IT'S NOT FAIR!" at the top of his lungs. Just a week ago we were on a trip as a family and driving on the highway. Francis was frustrated by something that didn't go his way, and a second later, the car dashboard lit up to notify me that his door had been opened. Thankfully we were able to pull over before anything worse happened, but neither Courtney nor I could convince our son of the severe consequences that could've resulted from his attempt to open the car door while traveling at a high speed.

From the time they wouldn't let me ride laying face first on my brother's skateboard to the movies they wouldn't let me watch, I was convinced that my parents were actively working against my happiness when I was growing up. It seemed like

every fun idea I came up with was met with a new rule prohibiting it. My friends and I were so proud when we learned how to ride our bikes with no hands, and within a day my parents outlawed my riding hands-free downhill on the busy street in our neighborhood. Maybe one of my friends almost hit a car, and maybe my mom was the driver of the car, but it still seemed overprotective to take away our fun just because of one bad experience. Even in the safe confines of our yard, they kept eliminating every opportunity for fun. I wasn't allowed to mix the gasoline from our lawnmower with the other chemicals I found around the house, and they even forbade us from a competition to see how long we could hang on the garage door as it went up. They'd often couch their restrictions in phrases like "because we love you," but these rules felt like nothing like love at the time.

For as long as I can remember, I've been interested in learning about God. Until around fifth grade, the concept of sin made sense to me. It seemed fairly simple: God didn't want people doing really bad things, so He gave us commandments and rules to follow. I knew lying wasn't good, I felt bad the few times I swore, and I knew that I needed to be nicer to other people. Then the teenage years came and I was saddened to learn that God had even more rules than my overprotective parents. Not only were my good ideas against my parents' policies, but apparently God also had issues with my creativity.

I didn't understand why God would even care that much about how I spent my time or what I thought about. I was blessed to grow up in an era when internet access was generally limited to a family's one computer, usually located in a main room of the house. I was also blessed to go through puberty in an era when slow download speeds meant a greater chance of getting caught if I tried to view pornography. I felt guilt and shame after each time I looked at porn, but I didn't see how it could be that harmful. Surely there were worse things I could be doing, so why was it a big deal?

The summer after my freshman year of high school, I went with my friends to a Steubenville Youth Conference in Steubenville, Ohio. Technically I didn't go anywhere since the conference was a mile from my house, but regardless, I traveled there. Specifically, my mom drove me there, but back to the story. One night of the

conference, the speaker was talking about how Jesus has the power to set us free from sin. I looked around and hoped that all the bad kids in the crowd were hearing the message, because I was sure they had real problems that they needed God to fix.

After all, I was a good kid who didn't really stray too far from the path. I knew that I struggled with sin, but I figured my sin wasn't so important that God needed to "set me free" as if I was chained to my sin. Throughout the talk that night, my mind kept going to the issue of pornography and the fact that I had been unable to stop looking at it. Several times after viewing porn in junior high and my freshman year, I felt ashamed and decided I wouldn't go back to it. Then a few weeks or days later, I'd fall again to the sin and commit once more to not fall again. As I reflected on this, I realized that maybe I was also in need of a freedom I couldn't win for myself. I offered a quiet prayer with all the honesty and awkwardness that only a 15-year-old kid with a bowl cut and braces could pray. In my heart I admitted to God that I was unable to stop myself from looking at pornography, and I asked Him to do in my life what I couldn't do.

I looked around after saying the prayer, wondering what would happen next. I didn't hear any voice from Heaven, I didn't feel anything differently, and I wondered if God had even heard me. I feared that my prayer might have been too unfiltered; I wasn't sure if it was legal to use the word "porn" when addressing God. But from that moment forward, He did the impossible. When I had the opportunity to look at porn, He had removed the desire from my heart. And in those moments when I had the desire to see porn, I never had the opportunity. This experience began to shift my understanding of God's rules.

In the eighth chapter of the Gospel of John, shortly after Jesus forgives the woman caught in adultery, we hear of Jesus offering freedom to His followers. Like me, they were offended that He would imply that they were enslaved to anything. Jesus replies, "Amen, amen, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave of sin. A slave does not remain in a household forever, but a son always remains" (John 8:34-35). I knew that God had rescued me from the attachment to this sin, and it made me rethink the way I viewed God's commands. I still wasn't sure that I wanted to be holy, especially if it would cost anything in my life, but I knew I wanted to be free. Even though the

existence of rules seemed contrary to my notions of freedom, I saw how my repeated free decisions to sin actually led to a restriction of my freedom and an attachment to sin. Maybe there was a reason for God's rules after all, even if they seemed from a distance to be ruining my fun.

Now as a parent, I notice myself being even more strict with my kids than my parents were with me. When Ellie was a year old, I brought her to play in the kids' area in the middle of the mall. It seemed low stakes, as the floor was well padded and there wasn't anything that big that she could climb on (and fall from). I hadn't anticipated the fact that other clumsy toddlers would be there at the same time as my daughter. I spent an incredibly stressful 20 minutes beside her, fearing every possible bad outcome and suspecting every other kid as a potential danger to her well-being. To everyone else in the play area that morning, I must've looked crazy. I was constantly scanning the area and reaching to catch Ellie every two seconds when I thought she might fall.

Courtney and I have to keep updating our rules as our children get older. Their abilities change and the potential risks change with each stage in the child's development. We realize that most of the rules probably don't make sense to the kids now, and I'm sure my children have moments where they're as convinced as I was that they are stuck with parents who won't let them do anything exciting. But the only reason we have rules at all is because we love our kids. Our restrictions aren't coming from a place of jealousy or a desire to control our children; we want them to thrive and to live life to the fullest. We are able to see things coming that the kids are completely unaware of, such as the likelihood of injury as two boys swing sticks at each other as hard as they can or the guaranteed burns if we let Isaac touch the intriguing glowing glass door on our fireplace. Even with our imperfect love for our children, we desire their happiness so much that we're willing to deal with their complaining and whining about our rules.

If you surveyed our kids, I bet they'd tell you that they dislike 100% of our rules. Even though Ellie could probably provide a reason for why we have half of the rules that we do, she'd still tell you that she wishes she could do what she wants. Almost every night we find ourselves in an argument with at least one of the children on the topic of bedtime. The arguments almost always takes place within two minutes of our telling the

kids to head upstairs for bed, and our adversaries are relentless in their attempts to delay the inevitable. Emotional appeals, newfound hunger, promises of improved behavior, the realization that certain toys haven't been played with enough that day, crying, accusations of unfairness, and even complaints that a pillow is "too comfy" have all been used by Ellie and Francis as weapons in the war against going to bed. Isaac seems to be even more opposed to bedtime in all its forms, but his arguments are much more concise. Pleas of "NO BED!" with intermittent whining, scratching, and fierce hugging for emphasis, are repeated until Isaac gives in and goes to sleep. Every night we get to watch our kids go through the five stages of grief in about twenty minutes; it's really fascinating.

Like the rest of our rules, our insistence that our children sleep at night simply comes from a desire for them to be fully alive and so they won't be emotional train wrecks the next day. By the next morning when it's time to wake up for school, Ellie and Francis are clinging to their beds and wishing they had slept longer. Conversely, in the moments before going to sleep, an enforced bedtime seems like the cruelest rule to them. Courtney and I know that most of our rules are unpopular when they conflict with what our kids want to do in a given moment. Even as an adult I can empathize with my kids; when there's something I really want, the desire seems so urgent and the thought of denying myself seems a burden too great to bear. I'm reminded especially of this during Fridays in Lent, when I can't eat burgers even though I know they alone could quench my hunger, calm my restlessness, and solve my existential crises.

We can try our best to explain to our children the rationale behind our restrictions, but most of our answers won't satisfy them at such young ages. It took many years, and becoming a father myself, before many of my parents' rules finally made sense to me. Several of the things I found annoying about my mom and dad are now some of the virtues I admire the most in them. This isn't to say that I now agree with every rule my parents had in our home, but even with the few I would change, I know they were trying their best to love us and protect us.

God's rules, unlike mine or those of my parents, are all coming from a perfect Father who knows what He's doing. He's not a first-time parent stumbling His way

through this thing; He knows better than we do what we need and how to protect us from dangers that we are aware of. Unlike Courtney and I, God is capable of remaining completely attentive to each of His children at the same time, so none of His laws are for the sake of crowd control. As the mystical body of Christ, the Church is entrusted with passing on the fullness of truth. At different points in my life, there have been various Church teachings that I've struggled to understand. These teachings either conflicted with my desires or they seemed unfair and arbitrary, but in time I've come to see the wisdom and love behind what we profess as Catholics. As a loving mother, the Church's concern for her children's well-being is greater than any desire for affirmation or appreciation from the prevailing culture. In the midst of our questions, we can trust that the rules and doctrines the Church sets forth are for our good. God our Father loves us too much to leave us wandering without direction, and He desires us to live free from the snares of sin.

Chapter 8: Every Good Gift

Sometimes she just knows. Her heart is set and there's no changing her mind. From the moment she wakes up, to the time we walk together to her school bus, she's unwavering. Other days it's back and forth, weighing the pros and cons of each option, still undecided by the time she heads to school. Of course I'm referring to my daughter's daily choice of sandwich for her kindergarten snack. Courtney and I believe in freedom and we want to give our children as many choices as possible, so Ellie can choose between peanut butter and jelly, peanut butter and banana, or the ultimate combination of peanut butter, jelly, and banana. Some nights she'll wake up in the middle of the night and walk into our room to let us know that she's either decided on a sandwich for the following day or just to let us know that she's still not sure which option she'll choose. If I make a sandwich that she's decided she no longer wants, the emotions come out strong and I frantically add banana slices just in the nick of time.

While Ellie usually overthinks her food choices, sometimes she just gets hungry and starts reaching for any food she can find. One afternoon I was slicing Thai chili peppers on the kitchen counter. Knowing that Ellie doesn't like very spicy food, I figured the peppers were safe on the counter. I quickly forgot how Ellie's love for bright colors trumps all other priorities in her decision making process. Seeing the red peppers on the counter, Ellie ran up and grabbed a handful as soon as I had walked away to clean the knife. I yelled and ran to stop her, but Ellie was determined to stuff everything she could into her mouth. After lots of coughing, tears, and milk, she finally recovered from the chili pepper overdose. I asked her why she wouldn't listen to my warning, but Ellie's explanation was simply that she thought she would like them.

One Saturday morning I decided to bless our family with bacon for breakfast. When it was finally done cooking, the boys were both insistent on grabbing handfuls of bacon. It's still not clear whether or not Isaac had any intention of eating the bacon, as he just ran (waddled) around the house clutching handfuls of the greasy goodness. I'm not quite sure he knew what one uses bacon for, but he knew that his siblings wanted it

so it was worth grabbing and keeping away from everyone else. I had to eventually convince Isaac that the bacon was also useful as food. Anything that fits in Isaac's mouth will suffice, and he's not on a strictly human food diet. Foods that Isaac spits out aren't necessarily rejected; they're often given a second chance after a few minutes once he's seen how good they look chewed up and on the floor.

Francis, on the other hand, was well prepared to receive the gift of bacon. His problem was that he stuffed way too much in his mouth and began coughing as it lodged in his throat. Fearing that he would choke on the bacon, I ran over to give him water and urge him to slow down. Fearing that I was planning to take his precious pig fat away, Francis proceeded to shove the remaining bacon into his mouth even though he had just coughed from already having too much food in there. The addition of bacon to a mouth already overflowing with bacon only led to more coughing and Francis' mouth ejecting all contents. Without skipping a beat, Francis proceeded to sift the visible bacon pieces from the vomit on the floor. I had to hold his hands back to prevent him from eating the bacon a second time. Reheated bacon is still good, but re-eated bacon isn't as tasty.

Several years ago I brought several of my nieces and nephews to the circus. Knowing that the circus vendors would be out in force that night, we ate dinner just before arriving, and I promised the kids a treat at the end of the night. I was pleasantly surprised at the lack of obnoxious selling during the show, but then the intermission came. The arena lights were dimmed and salespeople walked up and down every aisle hawking 200 varieties of light-up toys sold at prices far too rich for my youth minister budget. One of my nephews was fixated on the spinning toy being processed up our aisle, and he turned to me and asked what it was. I replied, "That's a rip-off." He stood up immediately, pointed to the vendor, and yelled, "I'd like a rip-off please."

As a kid, the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles were heroes of mine. They were an inspiration to an entire generation, teaching us that anything is possible with a little perseverance, team work, nuclear waste, and the mentorship of a rat. Growing up near the Ohio River, I had finally found superheroes with a relatable background. Michaelangelo was always my favorite ninja turtle, mostly because we shared a mutual

love for pizza. One night my parents ordered pizza for our family and I insisted that we get at least one pizza topped with anchovies. I had seen enough episodes of the cartoon to know that I would love anchovies just like Michaelangelo did, so I wouldn't listen to my parents' insistence that we should stick with more traditional pizza toppings. My family relented and ordered half of a pizza just for me, covered in anchovies. One bite of those tiny, salty, hairy toppings was all it took for me realize my whole childhood had been a lie. That was the last time I ever trusted sewer-raised, rodent-trained reptiles with my meal planning.

It's hilarious to see how passionate my kids get about things I know they don't really want. Whether it's a food that I know they'll hate or a toy that's guaranteed to fall apart within minutes of being unpackaged, it's always a challenge to help children see that their momentary desire is fixed on something they wouldn't even enjoy. As they get older, they're more able to verbalize how much they want these things and how heartless Courtney and I are for denying them. I can empathize with my kids; for as long as I can remember I've been certain that the things I want right now will make me happier. Each time something new comes along, I'm convinced that it's different, that this time I am wiser and more certain than the last time I wanted something. As a teenager I laughed at the things I thought I wanted as a 7-year-old. Now in my thirties I laugh at the things I swore I couldn't live without in college. (I'm looking at you, sleep)

For so long, it felt like situations that didn't go according to my plans were simply unanswered prayers. I figured that God either wasn't listening to my requests or that His silence proved His apathy. My understanding of God the Father wasn't all too different from Ellie reaching for the chili peppers. I saw God as the denier of what I wanted, and I kept reaching for what He warned me to avoid. Although I believed that God wanted me to go to heaven, I wasn't so sure that He cared about my happiness here on earth.

There is nothing that brings Courtney and I more joy than providing for our kids. We'll go to any lengths to care for them, and we'd sacrifice anything we have to protect our children. Whenever we do say "no" to what our children want, it's only because we love them. It's never from a place of resentment or a desire for our kids to suffer that we deny their requests. Even with our limitations and our imperfect efforts as parents, we

are committed to doing everything in our power to love generously. Everything we have is theirs; there's nothing we wouldn't give to provide for our children.

If this is my experience of desiring the good for my children, amidst all of my distractedness and selfishness, how much infinitely more must God the Father care for me. If I who have so little to give would give everything to bring my kids joy, how much more must the Father desire to give us. As technology progresses and we become increasingly aware of the world around us, we can't help but be humbled by our place in cosmos larger than we ever could've imagined. For some, this is a confirmation of our insignificance as humans, but for me, it is a resounding proof of the immeasurable generosity of our Heavenly Father creating a world in which we could encounter Him and marvel at His creativity. We prepared for Ellie's birth by buying a car seat and assembling a crib; God the Father set the stage for humanity by breathing galaxies and solar systems into existence.

Much like Ellie's daily sandwich dilemma, my desires change every minute and my heart remains a mystery even to me. In the first letter of John we are told, "God is greater than our hearts and knows everything" (1 John 3:20). We can be confident that the Father who fashioned our hearts knows better than we do what we really desire. As our perfect Father, He knows what will bring us joy, and He desires our joy even more than we do. Far from withholding anything from us, He only acts in our lives out of love. Love isn't one of His many motives, it's the heart of who He is.

So often in my life, I've fallen for temptations promising a fast path to satisfaction. I become convinced that happiness or peace can be found apart from God, and I fall for the lie that God and His laws are roadblocks preventing me from finding fulfillment. In the Letter of Saint James, we are reminded both of the deadly destination of sin's pursuit and of the Father's generosity. "Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers: all good giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no alteration or shadow caused by change" (James 1:16-17). God the Father's goodness isn't subject to change or dependent on our appreciation; His love is preemptive and His kindness doesn't hinge on our response.

It's impossible to overestimate the Father's desire to give us good gifts. In teaching His disciples how to pray, Jesus draws their attention to God's provision for birds and flowers (Mt. 6:25-33). I worry and plan as if my future and security are up in the air, forgetting that the very air I breathe is itself unmerited and beyond my ability to earn or create. Even when I'm at my best and feeling self-sufficient, my existence hangs on the sheer generosity of our Heavenly Father. In the story of the Exodus, we see God patiently teaching His people how to trust in His goodness. Like us, they often doubted and questioned God's ability to provide as they focused on obstacles and lost sight of everything He'd already done for them. When the people needed food, God sent manna from heaven (Exodus 16). He insisted that they only collect enough for each day; this was to be an exercise in trust, not food storage. God gently reminds us that He remembers our needs even from one day to the next. He doesn't sleep through His alarm; the Father is always laboring to care for His children.

Other than a few weird instances of demanding that I refrigerate their leftover pieces of toast, my kids are walking (and falling) reminders of what it means to trust in the provision of others. Ellie and Francis don't ration what they've been given, they'll happily use everything up with no regard for longevity. Batteries in our house don't last long because flashlights are left on for weeks and toys with sound effects are pressed 500 times a day. Recently I was frustrated that a particular toy had been making the same insanity-inducing sound all day, so I tried to teach Francis a lesson about the importance of conserving resources.

When he had triggered the toy's sound effects once more, I asked my son what he thought would happen when the batteries died. He simply responded, "You'll get new batteries." Of course he was right. My children operate from the assumption that they can freely use everything they've been given, because they trust we'll give them more when they run out. Yet I check my bank account balance religiously and lie awake at night thinking about our family budget because I struggle to trust that my security and my future lie in the hands of a Father who desires to provide for my needs.

Courtney and I don't just feed our kids because we'd be arrested for failing to do so; we simply love providing for them and we want them to be healthy and fully alive.

Despite their protests, we occasionally limit their chocolate intake because we value their well-being more than we fear their tantrums. Any time we withhold anything from our children, it's simply because we love them and we know that we have something better in store for them. Given the generosity of God the Father, my adult fear of scarcity is more laughable than my daughter's insistence that I refrigerate her toast.

Giving our kids the best life possible also involves a lot of saying "no" to their requests. No, Isaac cannot have only marshmallows for dinner. No, our six-year-old daughter Ellie can't have an iPhone. No, we don't agree with Francis that his bed is the best place to store his stick collection. Attempts to explain our perspective are usually futile because the attention span of the inquirer isn't long enough to last through our rationale. Courtney and I are aware of more pitfalls, opportunities, obstacles, and options than our kids can imagine. We keep these in mind, as best we can, in caring for each of our children. Our knowledge and experience provide us with a vantage point to see beyond the myopic perspectives of our kids.

Infinitely more than I can anticipate the needs of my children, God the Father has an eternal perspective in mind as He supplies for my needs. He patiently endures my questions, my demands for explanations, and my impatience with His timing. Through every "yes" and "no," every "not now" and even His silent responses to our prayers, what the Father has in store for us is beyond anything we could hope for (1 Cor. 2:9). On my good days I'm able to look back and remember what God has done already in my life. When I struggle to trust Him, I can at least be certain that the Father has proven Himself trustworthy thus far in my life. There's no reason for me to hesitate in asking or to minimize my requests; His desire to give will always exceed my desire to receive.

Chapter 9: Working with Dad

Some days, the kids decide that they'd like to help with work around the house. The only problem is that the chores they're motivated to assist with are rarely the tasks that Courtney and I are hoping to tackle that day. Usually the jobs our children feel drawn to are directly opposed to what we're looking for. Countless times we've asked them to pick up toys from the floor, but Ellie and Francis ultimately decide that it's more important that they reset each toy (already on the floor) to a new location (still on the floor) that better respects the spirit of that particular toy. Keep in mind that these are toys that had been thrown or left on the floor within the past few hours, so it always amazes me that when it's time to pick these toys up, the kids feign excitement over each piece as if it's a long-lost friend that they can't imagine evicting from its current location.

Any time that my children spend outside inevitably leads to their forming new attachments to sticks, rocks, and leaves that the kids can't imagine living without. Walking back in the house is always an attempted arbitration as Francis argues for how fun it would be to add a few stones and leaves to his bedroom floor. We recently traveled to France for a pilgrimage, and upon returning home, we emptied the kids' backpacks to find that Francis had smuggled three large sticks to Austria. It was the one time I found myself wishing that airport security had been more thorough on their scans, but Francis was clear that these were the best sticks he had found in France.

Despite our competing concepts of what constitutes work, or what kind of tasks are actually helpful, we love working alongside our kids. When Ellie had just turned two, the parish I worked at had a playground attached to a preschool. Ellie was at the stage in development where she was getting sturdier on her feet and a bit more ambitious, so playgrounds with slides could keep her entertained for hours. With no other children present to threaten harm, and the playground covered in wood chips to soften falls, I had finally found a common play area that was good for my blood pressure. After trying all the slides and swings, Ellie grabbed a toy wheelbarrow and started pushing it from one end of the playground to the other. After getting to the other side, she put one twig

in the wheelbarrow and walked to back to her starting point. Through a series of gestures, a few words, and some intense looks, she made it clear that she wanted me to help her move the sticks.

We made several trips, grabbing handfuls of sticks and loading them in the wheelbarrow, and then unloading the sticks twenty steps later when we had reached the obvious stick graveyard. As much as I love my daughter and valued her contributions, the stick relocation process was slowed greatly by Ellie's involvement. Either she would take sticks out of the wheelbarrow herself and throw them on the ground or she would insist on pushing the wheelbarrow and then lose her balance as the sticks came tumbling out. By the end of our time at the playground, I don't think we had successfully moved more than five or six sticks. What was incredible to me at the time was that Ellie found the task so fulfilling and was completely oblivious to the pathetic net result of our efforts.

Francis loves helping me bring firewood upstairs from our basement garage to the woodburning stove on the main floor. Each time he joins me, it takes longer than if I had done it myself. We first have a conversation about how much he loves fire, then we wait for him to find the most appropriate (according to the given day and mood he's in) shoes to wear into the garage. Once we're in the garage, he thoroughly analyzes various options of wood pieces while I stack logs into a basket. He confirms each piece with me that he's chosen, sometimes abandoning the stick seconds later when he's found a better one. When my basket is full of firewood, I tell him it's time to go back upstairs, but Francis always needs another minute or two to survey the garage once more and see if there are any good sticks he left behind.

Every so often I'll bring the kids to my office to give Courtney a break. As with every other experience in our family, the reality involves more cleanup than I had envisioned. I'll have cartoons loaded and ready to go on a computer in hopes that the kids will be as excited about the opportunity to watch cartoons in my office as they are to watch cartoons at home. Of course it can't be that easy. Usually Ellie will start by opening my desk drawers, searching for the perfect highlighters for her newest work of art. Next, Francis will be inspired by Ellie as he begins scribbling with the highlighters

that Ellie's deemed unworthy of her work. Approximately 70% of this scribbling is done on a paper while the rest of the scribbling becomes a permanent exhibit on my desk and the floor. Of the paper chosen, roughly half of the time it is pieces of paper that were blank and ideal for scribbling. The other half of the papers that Francis uses were previously useful and on my desk for a reason.

While both older siblings are scribbling on paper and furniture respectively, Isaac usually takes the opportunity to explore the now-opened desk drawers. Because the desk is at the level of Isaac's head, the only way he can get a good sense of the contents is to grab everything and throw it on the floor. Any resistance I offer or any attempts to redirect the kids' attention to the cartoons is met with responses from my new office mates that they prefer "helping" me over watching shows.

Looking back, I realize that my years in youth ministry weren't all that different from Ellie's lumber hauling efforts. I worked hard and tried my best, but at the end of the day, any real progress was all God's doing. I put pressure on myself, fearing that my failures would frustrate the Father's plan of transforming the lives of the teens I worked with. I worried about the small group questions, the talks, the snacks, even the games we played at the beginning of our weekly youth group meetings. I was convinced that I was doing this important job for God, as if He needed my help. I know that over the course of eleven years, there were several people that I disappointed and let down, and miraculously enough, God still reached them. Now several years later, it's incredible to see the ways that many of those teens (now adults) responded to grace and live for Christ.

God the Father must love working with us, His children. Even though He'll have to clean up the messes we make, even though our attempts to help often require more work on His part, God loves spending time with us. Though I could've moved the sticks much faster without Ellie's "help," the time spent was worth it for me because I love my daughter. If even an impatient dad like me can enjoy working alongside his kids, how much more must our perfectly patient Father love when we "help" Him.

It's so freeing when I realize that the pressure is off; God loves people too much to put the burden of their conversion solely on my shoulders. This doesn't negate the importance of our efforts and our baptismal call to share the good news with others, but it is essential to remember that God is inviting us to participate in His mission, not the other way around. The Church teaches that the Holy Spirit is the "principal agent of evangelization." It is God Himself who is both proclaiming the Gospel and opening the hearts of those who will receive it.

Grocery shopping with my kids is always an exciting experience. I never know which items they'll attempt to walk out of the store with or what newly discovered snack they'll swear that their lives would be meaningless without. Sometimes I make the mistake of letting Ellie and Francis push miniature shopping carts; by the time we reach the cashier, each little cart is packed with the five items I put inside and approximately 24 additional items that the kids thought they'd sneak past me. While my kids prefer their own carts, I'm a huge fan of the grocery stores that have full-sized shopping carts with miniature kid cars, complete with seatbelts and steering wheels attached to the front. I load my kids into the mini car and they're thrilled to be riding around and turning the steering wheels, completely unaware that they have no control over the path of our shopping cart. They'll still argue with each other over which way to turn and how fast they want to drive, oblivious to my role in the process. My kids are a lot like me; I worry about every twist and turn as if I was in control while God's really driving and asking me to come along for the ride.

For some reason, God constantly seeks to bring His stubborn and inefficient children into His work of redemption. At the last supper, Jesus warned His disciples that suffering was coming and that many of them would abandon Him. Like most men, Peter felt the need to assert his strength when it was called into question. He replied, "Even though I should have to die with you, I will not deny you" (Mark 14:31). Within hours, Peter would deny even knowing Jesus. Despite Peter's repeated denials, God was committed to working in and through Peter's life. Looking back through the history of the Church, we find a long line of sinners, deniers, and fair-weather followers that the Father continued to work with in reaching the world with the Gospel. In every sacrament

we receive supernatural gifts from the Father mediated through fallen people. God could have chosen any other way to reach us, but He keeps insisting on involving other people. He is so committed to us and remains faithful in good times and in bad. The Father's choice to work with me isn't based on my abilities or my talents, it's rooted in His love for me.

Chapter 10: Just Go to Sleep

Last night was rough. The night started off strong as Courtney and I lucked out with a dinner that everyone ate without complaining. After cleaning up the pieces of food that Isaac finally rejected after several rounds of taste testing, we let the kids play for a few minutes and then they all went to bed relatively peacefully. Then around midnight, Isaac woke up. We've learned the hard way that exhausted kids don't always sleep so well. When Ellie was a baby, I remember we were so optimistic one night as we put her to bed. She hadn't napped much that day, so Courtney and I naively assumed that meant Ellie was due for a great night of sleep. We were wrong then, and the lesson was relearned last night when our overtired son woke up late at night eager to party.

For four hours, I tried everything I could to get Isaac to sleep. He drank milk, I walked with him in my arms for awhile, I laid down with him, but nothing was working. Once I set him down, he'd stand back up and start running around in his crib. I brought him downstairs and immediately he demanded to watch kids singalong videos on YouTube. Before anyone is either overly impressed by Isaac's communication skills or alarmed by our lack of parenting skills, it's important to know that he simply said, "E-I-E-I." The "O" at the end was implied, and yes, we do let him watch an animated rendition of the Old MacDonald song every so often. No matter how desperate I was, I knew that screen time wouldn't help, so I found myself with an overtired, energetic, and whiny toddler who kept repeating those two vowels ad nauseam.

Isaac kept fighting sleep, and in hindsight his perseverance in the battle was impressive, but he eventually gave up and passed out in my arms. It was obvious that the kid needed to go to bed, but it was the last thing he wanted to do. As I held him, Isaac kept trying to squirm away, flailing and writhing to elude my grip. Even in my own sleep deprived state, I knew that my son wouldn't find rest in running around or watching YouTube videos, no matter how insistent he was. Especially for kids, sleep is essential to their growth and development. Children simply need sleep to aid in all the growing, learning, and moving they do every day. Like every other human who's ever lived, Isaac without enough sleep is a mess.

I miss the days when he was a baby, when rest was his default mode and when he was most content in our arms. There's something beautiful about the utter trust of a baby in the arms of their mother or father. They don't grip, they don't hold on to you, they often don't even open their eyes to see how high they are or what's around them. There's no fear or even awareness of the possibility of falling, because they're safe with us. As a father, there are few times in my life when I've felt more content than when my child is asleep in my arms.

Now that Isaac's getting older, he usually resists being held. Just like his older siblings, Isaac now only wants to be cradled in our arms when he's ready for bed, scared, or suffering in some way. In many ways our kids' growing independence is a good thing, but Courtney and I cherish the rare moments when our kids are willing to be held. Our kids are convinced that our embrace can protect them from whatever they fear and that our affection can heal whatever's hurting. While we never want to see our kids hurting or afraid, we are grateful for every second we are given to embrace our children. Most of the time they'll squirm away once the fear subsides or their pain is eclipsed by some shiny object in the room grabbing their attention.

I know you're not supposed to have a least favorite passage from the Bible, but for the longest time I didn't like the story of Martha and Mary. This particular narrative comes at the end of the tenth chapter of Luke's gospel, soon after Jesus sent His disciples out to preach and heal as they announced the coming of the Kingdom. Jesus prepared His followers well and they came back excited to share stories of God's power at work through their ministry. The disciples got to do cool stuff and demons were terrified of them. This is the type of story I can get excited about. After the disciples return, we read the parable of the Good Samaritan, another call for Jesus' followers to reach out in love and service. That's not quite as appealing as demon expulsion, but still I find it inspiring. Then Jesus goes to Martha and Mary's house.

As they continued their journey he entered a village where a woman whose name was Martha welcomed him. She had a sister named Mary [who] sat beside the Lord at his feet listening to him speak. Martha, burdened with much serving, came to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me by myself

to do the serving? Tell her to help me.” The Lord said to her in reply, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her. (Luke 10:38-42)

It never made sense to me why Jesus would affirm Mary for sitting around while her sister Martha is doing all the hard work. It’s understandable that Martha would be anxious, worried, and probably a bit annoyed that Mary just lounges around while Martha keeps busy serving Jesus. What could be more holy than making dinner for God? Doesn’t Jesus value Martha’s hospitality?

I pride myself in being busy. I must not be alone in this, because most of the time when I catch up with friends and ask how they’re doing, one of the first things I hear is how busy they are. For me, busyness is the barometer of my day. I feel lazy when I’m not productive. I used to say that I felt lazy when I was on vacation, but now that I have kids, a day on vacation is like every other day except with a higher chance of sunburn.

Even my time spent in prayer is busy. When I try to just have quiet prayer time with nothing to read or no prayers to recite, I spend most of the time thinking about the 30 things I still need to do before the end of the day. I’m not very good at sitting still. If I am not accomplishing anything or at least working toward some goal, I feel like I’m just wasting time. I am constantly striving for greater efficiency, convinced that my worth is tied to my productivity. My obsession with productivity isn’t limited to when I’m at work; I struggle with the fear of sitting still even at home with my family. Fortunately I’ve been blessed with children that are always willing to remind me of what matters most as they pull me away from checking my phone.

I’m comfortable with the idea of God as my cheerleader and motivator, but I’m usually too proud to realize my utter and constant need for Him. It takes a lot for me to recognize where I really stand. Illustrating the unique way that suffering wakens us to the reality of our dependence on God, author C.S. Lewis, in his book *The Problem of*

Pain, claims that pain “removes the veil; it plants the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul.” Like my kids, I resist the idea of resting in the Father’s arms

until I remember that's the only place I'll truly find peace in this life. When I experience moments that make me aware of my profound need for God, the reality of my existence is brought into focus again and I am reminded of my constant dependence on His goodness.

More than I desire to hold my restless kids, the Father desires to hold my restless heart. Despite my pride and distractedness, this overwhelming affection I feel for my children must be only a shadow or an echo of God's love for me. He knows well that my running around won't give me peace, my work won't set me free, and that the best use of my time spent with Him is for me to simply receive His love. I still can empathize with Martha's frustration, but I'm beginning to see that Mary did indeed choose the better position. In their inability and their helplessness, babies remind us that it is possible to be immensely loveable even when we're terribly unproductive. Just as Isaac's restlessness doesn't lessen my love for him, God tenderly continues to invite me back to prayer no matter how often I flee from His embrace.

From the very beginning of humanity's relationship with God in the Garden of Eden, it's clear that rest is an essential component of our lives. Before Adam and Eve had worked at all, they were commanded to take a day off. Celebrating the Sabbath rest helps to re-center our lives and to reorder our priorities as we humbly recognize that the world keeps turning and the Father continues to provide for us, even if we stop working for 24 hours. In the Psalms we even find a command to go to bed. The psalmist reminds us of the primacy of receptivity over production: "It is vain for you to rise early and put off your rest at night, to eat bread earned by hard toil—all this God gives to his beloved in sleep" (Psalm 127:2). The witness of men and women religious who have found a life of fulfillment and joy in the midst of embracing poverty challenges us to rethink our obsession with work and to be reminded of each person's true posture as beggars before God.

The lives of the saints testify to this reality. When we read their autobiographies, it can be disheartening to hear how they became more aware of their littleness before God as they progressed in the spiritual life. If these saints who truly drew close to God felt weak in their faith, what hope do I have? The saints' growing awareness of their

limitations actually served to draw them nearer to the Lord; in seeing their weaknesses they could see more clearly the depth of the Father's love for them. Our inadequacies are not disqualifications in God's eyes. He loves us with all the affection of a parent for their messy, stammering, stumbling toddler. Reflecting on her own weakness and the impossibility of progressing spiritually through one's own efforts, Saint Therese of Lisieux saw the image of an elevator as an analogy for what God can do for a soul:

I was far too small to climb the steep stairs of perfection. So I sought in holy Scripture...and I read these words: 'Whosoever is a little one, come to me.' It is your arms, Jesus, that are the lift to carry me to heaven. And so there is no need for me to grow up: I must stay little and become less and less. (Story of a Soul)

Though much of my time spent in prayer is full of distractions, with my mind ricocheting between overanalyzing the past and worrying about the future, God the Father can handle it. Although I'm less able to sit still in His presence than my kids are in mine, God's okay with that. In referring to our childlike posture before God the Father, the Catechism beautifully illustrates the importance and simplicity of contemplative prayer. "Contemplative prayer is the prayer of the child of God, of the forgiven sinner who agrees to welcome the love by which he is loved and who wants to respond to it by loving even more. But he knows that the love he is returning is poured out by the Spirit in his heart, for everything is grace from God. Contemplative prayer is the poor and humble surrender to the loving will of the Father in ever deeper union with his beloved Son" (CCC 2712).

I love the wording in the last line of that description. We should always be aware of our poverty before God, cognizant of how little we have to offer Him. My poverty extends to my surrendering as well; I love to cling fiercely to everything I have and I'm bad at letting go. Even if I surrender poorly, if I struggle to let go of my agenda and my to-do lists in prayer, I can still find the Father's arms reaching to embrace me. Though I still have a long way to go before they'll be naming churches after me or asking me to pose for a holy card, I am just as loved and cherished by God as the great saints that we honor and strive to imitate. The goal isn't for me to go off and do great things for

God, the goal is to rest in His presence and learn to trust that He'll do great things through me.

Chapter 11: Paper Scraps and Worship

Kids are pretty terrible at keeping secrets. Maybe this is why they're not typically hired to do intelligence work. For Christmas this past year, both Ellie and Francis made a gift for Courtney and I at their school. The gift each kid made was a battery-operated light made to look like a large candle (it's like they knew exactly what I was hoping for), and they brought the candles home two weeks before Christmas.

The day they brought the candles home, even before taking their backpacks off, the secret was too much for Francis to hold in. He jumped off the bus (after it was stopped of course) and said, "Hey, dad, we made you a candle but you can't know about it because it's a secret. It's for you, for Christmas, but it's a secret." I assured him that he could trust me with the information. Ellie was slightly more discreet, but within three hours she couldn't resist showing me what she had made. In the two weeks that followed, I had approximately 10 conversations with the kids about how excited they were for us to see the secret candles that they had made for us. I was even asked to fix one of the secret candles on Christmas Eve because the battery had already run out from extensive use over the previous two weeks.

Finally on Christmas morning Ellie and Francis put the candles under the tree, completely unwrapped, and asked Courtney and I if we knew what gifts we'd receive. The children were so excited to finally give us the candles, and I should've received an Oscar nomination for the convincing work I did in feigning surprise. My surprise was faked but the gratitude was completely genuine.

Ellie loves drawing and coloring, and it's exciting to see her develop as an artist. Most days she'll bring home 1-2 papers with her drawings, and usually she creates each piece with either Courtney or me in mind. From the color choices to the theme of the drawing, Ellie is very intentional with all the decisions that go into the art that she gives us. No matter how many pages of her artwork Ellie creates during and after school, she's always clear about who each piece was intended for. She's had this love of drawing since she was two years old, but it's nice for us now that the things she draws are obvious and we don't have to offer vague affirmations of, "You really did a

great job coloring whatever that shape represents, and I can tell you put a lot of work into that yellow thing in the corner.”

Gifts from Francis require the use of one's imagination. He walked up to me a few days ago and handed me 15 scraps of paper, some with blue writing on them but none of them in any commonly recognized shape. He proceeded to explain that the largest piece was an “underwater rocket ship” and that the remaining scraps were various related accessories. Naturally the rocket set was a gift for me, so now I'm trying to keep track of all these pieces so none of them are mistaken for trash. Hopefully my wife can tell the difference between a booster pack and torn paper destined for the recycling bin, even if they appear at first glance to be one and the same. Without fail, Francis always brings something home that he made for me at school. Years later he might admit that he just didn't want to throw away the trash that he had collected in his backpack, but for now I'm believing that these gifts are coming from the bottom of his heart.

Isaac has recently started handing me my things that he finds in the house. One morning it was a shoe, the next day it was the wireless mouse for our laptop. His joy in giving me these things is evident in his beaming smile as he runs to me with whatever he's grabbed. It's especially sweet because he's so young that his vocabulary's very limited, so the interaction just involves him handing me the item and him saying “Daaaaaaddy.” Sometimes the gifts are even personalized, like handing my wife her phone or bringing one of my shoes to me. He's so proud of himself for being able to give us these things and his face lights up as he walks over with gifts in hand.

After seeing the play *A Christmas Carol*, Ellie and Francis are now obsessed with reenacting the scenes for Courtney and me. They've been going strong for months now and show no signs of slowing down. Unfortunately for us, they only remember a handful of lines and the part of the plot they've latched onto is the haunting by Jacob Marley's ghost. Every day Ellie and Francis sit us down in the living room so they can compete for the role of the dead accountant. My wife and I are so proud of our kids for aiming at realistic life goals. Who needs superheroes anyway? When Ellie's playing Marley's ghost, there's a lot of singing as she relates every detail she remembers about the play.

Francis' performances are a lot shorter and just involve him marching around yelling, "I'm Jacob Marley, and I've been in prison my whole life." Honestly the acting isn't that great. Neither of them is believable in the role, they haven't memorized many lines, and they always pick the worst possible time of day to perform (right before dinner). It's the best. There's nothing in the world that makes me laugh harder than Francis playing the role of Jacob Marley, and I could listen to Ellie's musical commentary all day.

I'm sure that eventually our kids will outgrow paper-based gifts, or in Isaac's case, finding what was never lost and gifting me with items that already belonged to me. As much as I won't miss having to account for the now hundreds of paper scraps that were crafted with me in mind, I will be sad when the kids get older and the gifts become more practical. I'm sure at least one of our kids will continue to improve artistically as they get older, but there's something especially beautiful about our kids giving us art that's not all that aesthetically impressive. It's a strange generosity that Francis, our fast-moving son who never spends more than three minutes on an activity, would cut up hundreds of pieces of paper and scribble on each one with different markers. Even Isaac's attempts at gift-giving move my heart as his face makes it clear that he is thrilled to be able to do something helpful. I can't imagine receiving gifts from our kids more meaningful than the drawings, the scraps, and the left shoes I've been given. Guests to our house are clueless when they see pieces of paper and lonely shoes randomly dispersed, but I've got all these reminders of how loved I am everywhere I step.

When I was a kid, the only gifts I remember giving my parents were purchased at my elementary school's annual Christmas gift bazaar. Looking back now, I wonder why they never had any normal or desirable gifts for sale. Presumably there were some parents involved in the organization of the sale, as I can't imagine 9-year-olds brokering consignment deals with the type of vendors that would sell *English Leather* cologne and steel wool pads.

You'd think that the parents planning the event would've at least included gifts that were desirable or at least useful. Maybe they did have great gifts and I just remember the cologne. All I know is that every boy in my third grade class walked in with the intention of purchasing meaningful gifts for each of our families, but we all

found the cheap cologne we really needed and walked out of that cafeteria smelling like old men. We also gave the cologne as gifts to our dads, and I still remember my excitement in giving the *English Leather* to mine. I was convinced that I had found the perfect gift for him, even though I'd never known him to wear cologne. I don't remember his reaction, but the memory does provide some empathy when my kids hand me their daily gifts.

In 2001 I spent a semester studying here in Gaming, Austria, with Franciscan University of Steubenville. Though I didn't play it well, I thought I would look cool if I brought a guitar to Europe. I mostly wanted stickers from everywhere I traveled to put on my guitar case. Until now, it never dawned on me that I probably could've saved myself from a lot of work if I had just left the guitar in Ohio, bought the stickers in Europe, and waited till I got back home to America to put them on the case. So I brought this guitar, with little ability to play and absolutely no ability to sing.

Soon after arriving in Gaming, one of the Franciscan priests who was working with the study abroad program introduced himself to me and told me that he wanted me to be in charge of music ministry for the masses all semester. I quickly explained that I neither played nor sang, despite the guitar I was holding. He must not have been listening; a week later I found myself leading a music group at mass. Fortunately we were up in the choir loft, so I could be nervous without being seen by everyone. I had no problem with being in front of people, but I only like being in front of people if it's on my terms. I'm totally comfortable giving a talk to a large audience, but I knew I wasn't a musician and this insecurity left me really anxious. I was the only instrumentalist, so I asked three or four friends if they'd sing with me to help drown out the sound of my guitar and, more importantly, my voice. For each song and mass part, I'd strum a short introduction and then give a vigorous head nod so the singers could come in and take over.

We were doing just fine until the memorial acclamation. This is the part of the mass in the middle of the consecration, right after the bread and wine have become the Body and Blood of Christ. Everyone is kneeling, the church is silent in prayer, and it's now time for us to lead the congregation in singing, "Christ has died, Christ is risen,

Christ will come again.” For anyone not familiar with the flow of the Catholic mass, this is really a solemn moment in the liturgy. The singers and I had rehearsed this part several times, so I played the three-chord intro and nodded my head for them to start singing. They just stared at me confused, so I tried playing the intro again.

This time I nodded even more dramatically, once again grateful that I was invisible to the congregation and safely perched in the choir loft. More blank stares followed and I was aware that the mass simply had to go on; neither the liturgy’s rubrics nor my guitar ability could withstand a third attempt at the introduction. Desperate times called for desperate measures, and I realized I would have to sing.

Unfortunately I realized two seconds too late and had already missed the first two words of the phrase before belting out, “DIED” at a volume level higher than necessary and spoke-sang the rest of the acclamation. People say that usually when you’re embarrassed, you’re focusing on something that nobody else even noticed. I hoped it was the case that no one in the congregation was even aware of my slip up. After putting the music away, I headed to lunch to meet up with my friends. Within seconds of my entrance, one girl just looked at me and yelled “DIED” from across the room. Apparently other people had heard my brush with death.

Though I showed up in Austria with no plans of doing anything musical in front of people, God had other plans. It wasn’t like I had these secret talents I was keeping hidden; I knew that I wasn’t good and that’s why I never planned to do anything with music. What began with a painfully humbling experience later became an important part of my life and my youth ministry. Eventually I got less bad at singing and playing, and I was given incredible opportunities to travel and lead music for several retreats and events from that point forward. It’s been clear to me that this talent wasn’t at all the fruit of my efforts or some natural ability; I knew it was simply a gift from God the Father and a way that He was inviting me to participate in what He was doing in the world.

In the Gospel of John we find the story of Jesus feeding 5,000 people. Jesus first asked his disciples if they had any ideas of how they could feed such a huge crowd. Phillip responds that the cost alone for such a feat made it unimaginable. Then we’re told that a boy came forward with a few loaves of bread and some fish. Next thing you

know, Jesus is thanking His Father and the disciples are running around collecting leftovers after everyone had eaten as much as they wanted. I find it interesting that Jesus isn't helped by any of the professionals; His supplier that day was just some kid who happened to have extra food.

Scripture is full of stories of God continuing to invite unqualified people to play a role in His story. He picked Moses with a speech impediment to speak truth to the pharaoh, He picked David to be king even though his only previous work experience was taking care of sheep, and Jesus bypassed a handful of full-time fisherman that day to receive the generous gift of two fish that this little boy had to offer.

I'm not at all comparing my short-lived music career to the Davidic Kingdom or to the Exodus, though an argument could be made that my initial musical attempts were reminiscent of plagues. When we give anything to God with a generous heart, He receives it with joy and blesses it. I believe the Father delights especially in our awkward gifts and our sputtering attempts to please Him. There's something beautiful in the humility of children giving their all in something they're not particularly talented at. As we get older and our pride becomes attached to our proficiencies and our comfort zones, it's much easier to give from places of surplus in our lives.

As the Church dives into the New Evangelization and seeks to re-engage the baptized and reach those outside the Church, I think it's a real danger that we would overemphasize our role and underestimate the centrality of the Holy Spirit's work. God forbid we turn the Gospel into a talent show where we line up the best looking and best sounding Catholics to wow people from a stage. At best, we'd convince the world that we have good speakers.

It seems that God loves to work powerfully through people that clearly don't have much to offer from a worldly perspective. No one hearing Peter preach at Pentecost left thinking that he should start a career as a motivational speaker, yet the Spirit of God was in his words and thousands converted that day. The Father wants to involve all of us in bringing glory to His name; the only question is if we will allow Him to do so. The underequipped and the unqualified become the best candidates, because when good

things happen through them, it's clear to everyone that the power must be coming from God.

My kids point me daily to the reality that God the Father rejoices in everything we offer Him from our hearts. Whether we're giving Him some good work we're proud of, or simply handing over our failures and our shortcomings, the Father delights in our gifts. If I am able to see the love Francis puts into every piece of paper he cuts for me, how much more must the Father know and see every single effort I put into loving Him, no matter how successful or impressive. Our worship is beautiful to God because He sees the love behind our distracted prayer and our heartfelt attempts to be patient with each other. Just as the messy and aesthetically lacking art from my kids is more beautiful to me than the professionally done paintings hanging on our walls, I'm convinced that God the Father delights in our awkward and messy attempts to please Him. He doesn't just put up with our lack of coordination; He delights in the beauty that only a parent could recognize.

In the mass before the bread and wine are consecrated, one of the prayers addressed to God the Father includes the phrase, "You have no need of our praise, yet our desire to thank You is itself Your gift." As our loving Father, God patiently teaches us how to pray to Him. We're more helpless than my son, Isaac; we can't even begin to pray without the Holy Spirit teaching us how. And this isn't annoying or frustrating to God; He loves us in the midst of our inabilities and our neediness. Like Isaac handing me shoes that were already mine, our generosity to the Lord is simply a response to what He's already given us.

In every liturgy, we mysteriously participate in the once-and-for-all offering of Jesus to the Father for the salvation of the world (CCC 1366). The best gift we can possibly give our heavenly Father is His perfect Son; even our worship requires divine assistance throughout. The humble bread and simple wine brought to the altar at every mass should remind us of how lopsided our exchanges are with God. We give Him so little, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Father gives us back our gifts transformed into Jesus. Surrendering to God always leads to gaining more; are we willing to entrust Him with everything He's already given us?

Chapter 12: On Our Side

I've found that part of parenting is making a huge deal out of seemingly insignificant events in the lives of our children. We've all had the painful experience of having to listen to parents ramble on about their little geniuses or insist on showing you their little brat's macaroni art; a parent's desire to talk about their kids is always 1,000 times greater than everyone else's desire to hear about those kids. Sometimes I'm aware enough to notice people's eyes glazing over as I share all about Ellie's latest adventures or Isaac's most recent bowel movement, but usually I'm oblivious. Reading the last few sentences, I'm realizing that the same could be said about this entire book, but since you've already made it this far, I might as well keep going.

Last year we were visiting an aquarium in Spain, and all three kids were running around in the children's play area. I've become slightly less anxious about my kids' safety in public play places, but I was still constantly monitoring the scene to make sure all three were doing well. Within a few minutes in the play area, Ellie had successfully traversed the entire structure and was running around rolling her "r's" convinced that she could now speak fluent Spanish. Isaac was content to spend the time laying down in one of those plastic ball pits, trying to eat each ball in the hopes that at least one of them would turn out to be something other than a collection of new and exciting communicable diseases.

Francis was focused on the incline that he saw older kids trying to climb. The padded surface was slippery, but there were a few pieces spread out for the kids to grab hold of or step onto as they attempted the hill. At first, I doubted that my son would make it to the top, given both the difficulty of the incline and the presence of ten other kids scrambling up and down. At age three, Francis' initial excitement for adventure would typically fade quickly into frustration and giving up. It was tough to watch as he kept falling down the hill, over and over, either because he ran out of energy or because one of the other kids fell into him and knocked him back down. It must've taken about twenty minutes and fifty attempts, but Francis eventually made it to the top. I couldn't believe it.

I received a bunch of weird looks from the other parents there as I screamed and cheered to congratulate my now victorious son, but they had no idea what a big deal it was that Francis had actually persevered and succeeded despite repeated failures.

When we got back from that trip, I kept telling my friends about Francis and the climb. For the next several nights I went to bed replaying the scene in my mind; I was so proud of my son for what he overcame that day. Though it was a relatively insignificant accomplishment, one that he probably won't remember years from now, I knew how much it mattered to Francis and I felt like my son had just won the Super Bowl.

I remember vividly the time when I knew for sure that my dad was proud of me. For my whole life I've been trying to make my family laugh, and for several years, my attempts earned laughs from my siblings and corrections from my parents. It's not that they were trying to oppress me, my parents just weren't cultured enough to appreciate fake foreign accents during our nightly decade of the rosary at the dinner table. For a project in a high school history class, we had to reenact a scene from the first World War. The rest of my group provided the required content while I took the important role of imitating a local TV anchorman. My impression of the reporter was a bit over the top, but I showed my parents the video expecting nothing more than the sighs of parents wondering why they were continuing to fund my education. The next morning my mom told me that my dad was cracking up laughing the night before as he told her how funny he thought my impression was. I always knew my dad loved me, but if he was always affirming me, how could I ever know when I had really made him proud? To know that I brought joy to my dad really made my day. Twenty years later I still look back on that moment as a turning point in our relationship, though I still think my rosary accents were among my best work.

Throughout my life, I've been told that God is watching over me. It was helpful to hear this as a little boy slightly afraid of the dark, but as I grew older I came to fear Him as some divine police officer or referee. If He was watching me, I was convinced that He was waiting to see me screw up so He could punish me and teach me a lesson. I don't know if Francis was even aware that I was watching the entire time he tried to climb the hill.

There's no way he could know how much I was rooting for him, and how it took every ounce of self-control I had to not pull him up myself or push all the other kids out of the way so he could reach the top.

More than I was aware of the obstacles standing in Francis' way, God the Father is aware of the struggles we face in life. He knows how many times we've fallen; He knows how hard it is to keep trying when we're tempted to give up. And more than I was rooting for my son, the Father is pulling for me. He doesn't stay close to catch us sinning or to catch us messing up. He simply wants to catch us, to lift us back up when we fall. God doesn't watch us like some detached observer, He is overwhelmingly and unwaveringly for us. In his letter to the Romans, Saint Paul describes the lengths and depths of God's love for us. The Father loved us into being, He loved us so much that He sent His Son to redeem us, and He sent His Spirit to make us holy so that we could share His life. "What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31)

God the Father isn't simply with us or near us, He is in love with us and actively working for our good. He sees our efforts, He knows our weaknesses and our tendency to give up in frustration, and He celebrates even our smallest victories over sin and selfishness. This is a radically different notion than the idea of God the Father as some distant observer. The way I approach prayer changes when I'm aware that the Father I'm praying to is actually on my side. I shouldn't hesitate to ask the Father for things, fearing that my requests are a burden or tiresome for Him. When I do fall into sin, I should be all the more motivated to seek reconciliation because I've turned away from the God who loves me deeply.

Several years ago I traveled with two friends to visit Ireland. One afternoon we visited the Knock Shrine and there were a few priests hearing confessions as we arrived. I was eager to go to confession, both because I needed to go and because I knew I'd never see the priest again. It's not that I had any really exciting sins to confess, nor that I have ever known a priest to betray the seal of the sacrament, it's just that the anonymity of confessing in a foreign country was appealing to me at the time. When I heard the priest's prayer at the beginning, I knew I had hit the jackpot.

The priest in the confessional that day sounded pretty old, which meant he'd probably have lots of wisdom to offer, and he had a great Irish accent, which meant that even his critiques of my life's trajectory would sound charming.

Kneeling behind the confessional screen, I launched into my list of sins. After I had gotten out only one or two sins, both of the priest's hands reached around the screen. I hesitated for a second, unsure if maybe the sins I confessed had upset him so much that I was going to get slapped. His hands grabbed my hands and he just held on as I continued with the list of my guilt, shame, and regrets. As I continued confessing, I kept looking down at his hands holding mine, wondering if the next sin I said would be the one to make him let go. No matter what I shared, he never let go. When I had finished confessing my sins, the priest released my hands and prayed the words of absolution.

It was a strange but beautiful experience of God the Father's tenderness. As I acknowledged my brokenness and admitted my specific sins out loud, the priest never once pulled back or loosened his grip. Even at my worst, the Father isn't second-guessing His commitment to me and He'll never let go. My sins don't scare Him, and my confessions don't surprise Him. During Jesus' public ministry, He frequently spent time with known sinners and outcasts. It was unfathomable to many that any decent man, let alone God's Son, would make time for such unholy people. Yet Jesus made it clear that He came specifically to redeem and rescue the lost. When the Pharisees expressed concern about Jesus dining with sinners, He responded, "Those who are healthy do not need a physician, but the sick do. I have not come to call the righteous to repentance but sinners" (Luke 5:31-32). In sending His Son into the world, the Father revealed the depths of His love for His wayward children.

God is not cheering for us from a distance. He is actively engaged in the struggles of our lives and in the battles we face every day. His love for us is without conditions and His love is unhesitating. The Father's love doesn't change with the seasons or rise and fall with our stumbling on the path to holiness. At our worst, when we put the Son of God to death, He chose to remain with us.

In the face our rejection, our blasphemies, our taunts, and our torments, Jesus begged forgiveness for us with His dying breaths. Jesus was never a passive victim; He chose to endure suffering for our salvation every step of the way. This is how committed the Father is to rescuing His lost children. Jesus carried the cross not simply out of duty but with all the love of a groom heading down the aisle.

Many crucifixes and images of Good Friday portray a detail from the Gospel of John showing Jesus with His head bowed as He died. Saint Bonaventure, a 13th Century Franciscan theologian, offers a powerful reflection on the significance of this detail. Bonaventure sees Jesus' bowed head not as a sign of His death as much as a sign of His reverencing us. This is the scandal of the incarnation: God continues to lower Himself to serve, love, and save people who continue to reject His love. To the woman caught in adultery, while she stands before the condemning crowd, Jesus lowers Himself to meet her where she is on the ground before He says one word (John 8). In the midst of her shame, her guilt, and her humiliation, Jesus bows to her and lowers Himself to elevate her dignity. Before we've done anything good, and even in the aftermath of our greatest sin, Jesus lowers Himself to be with us and He bows His head to us. In Jesus, we see beyond the shadow of a doubt that the Father is for us and not against us.

Christ on the Cross bows His head, waiting for you, that He may kiss you; He stretches out His arms, that He may embrace you; His hands are open, that He may enrich you; His body is spread out, that He may give Himself totally; His feet are nailed, that He may stay there; His side is open for you, that He may let you enter there. (Saint Bonaventure, *Soliloquy on Four Spiritual Exercises*)

Chapter 13: Puzzles and Suffering

I know that most of you people are probably offended when someone makes generalizations about entire groups of people, but Austrians are really good at taking care of their stuff. (As a side note, I don't generally generalize, nor do I support the habit in others. I thought it would be funny to say "most of you people" and then to make a sweeping statement about concerns about generalizations. Now that I've spent so much time explaining the joke, I'm sure it's really going to be well received). Moving to Austria with just our clothes and a few toys for the kids, we've ended up getting some good deals from local flea markets. Because I believe there's always more space for abandoned items under our couches, I've purchased several jigsaw puzzles for the kids at local Flohmärkte (that's 'flea markets' in German, but I'm sure you already knew that). I've been so impressed to find that with each used puzzle we bought, every single piece was in the box.

So far Ellie's been the only kid of ours with an attention span long enough to work on a puzzle with more than five pieces, and we usually need to wait until her brothers are either asleep or occupied elsewhere to work on the puzzles together. She always starts out strong with plenty of enthusiasm, quickly finding two or three pairs of pieces that go together. No matter what she's doing, if Ellie is enjoying it, she always provides her own extremely affirming soundtrack. Usually her song is something along the lines of, "Look at her go, she's the best, she can do everything, in the world, she's so good." I have no idea where she gets this confidence from, but I've been told by my wife that the would-be-annoying-if-you-didn't-love-her constant singing flows directly from my genes.

After about three minutes, the obvious puzzle piece matches have run out and the self-motivation song fades. Very quickly, Ellie is convinced that the puzzle is impossible to complete and she suggests we give up. When I convince her that we need to keep working on it, trying to encourage her that we can finish the puzzle, Ellie often chooses one piece that she cannot find a match for. For her, this lonely piece is proof that the puzzle is impossible. There are only two successful ways that I've found out of this situation, but of the two there is one that she almost never agrees to try. In

my humble opinion, as a man who has completed the same 24-piece *Finding Nemo* puzzle approximately 270 times in his now long life, I believe that the “edges and corners” approach is the fastest way to complete a jigsaw puzzle. Pieces along the edge of a puzzle will always stand out because they have one flat side, and corner pieces are easy to spot because they have two flat sides (you already knew you were reading a good book, but the inclusion of puzzle strategy tips is probably what pushes this work over the edge).

Once you’ve isolated and strung together all the corners and side pieces, the puzzle becomes much more manageable. Especially in the puzzles we have, about two-thirds of the work is done once you’ve completed all four sides. For whatever reason, Ellie will rarely take my advice of working on the corners first. She focuses on the piece that she has in her hand, but she’s unaware of how this particular piece fits within the entire picture. Ellie will continue to stare at the piece and grow frustrated as a few attempts to connect it with other nearby pieces are unsuccessful.

When I realize that she’s not going to choose the efficient strategy, I start looking at the other pieces to find a match for the piece she is fixated on. Knowing that Ellie takes great pride in doing things herself, I can’t simply hand the piece to her when I find the match. It’s important to her that she feels like she made it happen, so when I find it first, I’ll just suggest she tries looking in a different area for the piece she needs. If that’s not enough help, I’ll move the piece next to Ellie’s when she’s not looking, and soon after finding it, tells me how she can’t believe it was right there all along. Soon after all the pieces are in place, Ellie will proudly announce to Courtney that she finished the puzzle all by herself.

I can’t be all that mad at Ellie for taking all the credit in finishing the puzzle. First of all, I’d expect mockery from everyone ages six and up if I were to brag about my contributions toward the completion of a 24-piece *Finding Nemo* puzzle. Secondly, every time we work on a puzzle together, I’m reminded of how naively I often relate to God the Father. For much of my 20s, I was throwing a tantrum like Ellie when I prayed. I held up one piece of my life, alternating between the questions of my vocation and my career, and I demanded over and over that God make sense of it.

The importance of starting with edges and corners is obvious when putting together a puzzle, but I was just frustrated and annoyed at the prospect of having to work on anything else in my life other than trying to find a wife or figuring out a 10-year plan for my career. Growing in virtue, being a better friend, striving for excellence in the job I had at the time, and cultivating self-discipline just didn't sound that exciting to me, so I hesitated to work on those areas of my life that I knew God was inviting me to address in the present moment.

No matter how blessed I was to have strong friendships and to have a great job at a great parish as a youth minister, I was never satisfied. In his inaugural homily as the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI said, "The world is redeemed by the patience of God. It is destroyed by the impatience of man." Amidst my tantrums, my impatience and my stubbornness, God the Father patiently loved me and never relented. In those moments where I was able to see progress and growth in my life, my tendency was to take all the credit for the work God had done.

Our Father in Heaven isn't overwhelmed by our problems. He is not surprised by the outcomes that don't go as planned, and His plans aren't thwarted by our stalling and stumbling along the way. Because His perspective is eternal, God the Father can see beyond the immediate obstacles that we can't imagine getting past. In the middle of our fighting and our resisting the demands of daily life, God will not give up on us. He can handle the pieces we've thrown aside in our anger and fear, because He is eternally faithful.

Still today I find myself struggling to focus on the present moment, but God gently and lovingly draws my attention away from my seemingly urgent questions. He reveals in time the progress He's making in other areas of my life. No matter how many times the Father has proven His ability to put pieces of my life together, I still keep staring at the next piece wondering how He'll possibly make sense of it. For too many years, my relationship with God revolved around my big questions and my obsession with the future. Instead of seeking to learn more about who God is, I treated Scripture like a horoscope, looking for each passage and verse to provide clues to the answers for my urgent inquiries. I shouldn't have been surprised that prayer for me felt nothing like the

rest and refreshment I had heard others speak of; I kept showing up to pray with 50 questions and no time to listen.

I've slowly grown in my understanding of prayer. From a practical level, I've realized that my life is much more peaceful and enjoyable when I can begin to trust that God is in the middle of my life with me. He's always helped me in the past, so I don't need to worry that He'll abandon me by the time today's crisis hits. When I approach prayer with a desire to get to know my Heavenly Father, I'm less likely to be anxious as life unfolds and I'm more confident that He'll give me what I need when I need it. Even more than my daughter is unsure of how her jigsaw puzzle pieces will fit together because she doesn't have the entire picture in mind, my life can seem random and senseless when I try to make sense of the present moment in isolation from the larger context.

It seems that we often operate from one of two perspectives: either God is actively involved in the affairs of our lives or He's not. If God is playing an active role in my life, then it's not up to me to tie up all loose ends or to fix all my problems and the problems of those around me. His presence and provision takes the pressure off of me. I'm still called to strive to serve and to grow in virtue, but the larger task of keeping the universe held together is off my plate. Time in prayer can be spent more peacefully when I know that God is still working for my good when my prayer ends and I'm back to the daily grind. Prayer is no longer just the time where I ask for energy and power to go change the world; it's the place where I encounter the Father who loves me and wants to give me a front row seat as He is renewing the world. Remembering how faithful He's been, I can begin to trust that God is able to bring good even out of pain and disappointment in my life.

Experiencing small doses of suffering as a father has begun to open my eyes to the reality of how aware and concerned our heavenly Father must be for us. Ellie learned to walk within days of her first birthday. Initially we were so excited that she had taken her first steps, but we soon realized that this new development included months of terror as she staggered and stumbled with no ability to catch herself from the countless falls that ensued. One afternoon that spring, we were at our parish hall; I was

outside with Ellie while Courtney was inside for a meeting. Ellie insisted on walking on the concrete in the parking lot, and my fear of her falling was slightly less than my fear of her tantrum if I tried to make her walk on the grass. Within a minute, Ellie faceplanted, and Courtney ran outside when she heard the screaming. Blood started streaming from our daughter's mouth and we were so worried. Ellie's always had a strong gag reflex, so her crying usually led to coughing and then vomiting.

We ran to the car to head home, and Courtney started googling "child bleeding mouth" to get an idea of how serious the injury was. Within five seconds of browsing, we had narrowed down the diagnosis to three possible options: the bleeding would stop within a minute or two and she'd be fine, the injury would result in death, or this was proof of government conspiracy involving aliens and beloved former U.S. president Jimmy Carter. Fortunately the wise guardians of the internet only allow medical professionals to post their findings online. We feared the worst (of the injury options I mean, not the conspiracy stuff) as Ellie's cries turned into coughing and then we started seeing large dark red chunks coming up as she started throwing up in the car seat. I forgot to mention to Courtney that Ellie had eaten several blackberries shortly before she fell, so Courtney assumed she was witnessing massive blood loss resulting from a life-altering accident. Even though I was the one who fed Ellie the blackberries, I trust my wife's instincts, so I started freaking out as well until I remembered the berries.

Within ten minutes, we were back home, Ellie had stopped bleeding and crying, and everything was back to normal. But in the midst of the chaos it was absolutely horrible. It's brutal to watch your child suffer, to see them hurting and to be unable to fix the problem. You would give absolutely anything to take away their pain, and you'd swap places with them in a heartbeat if it was possible. Having children is like having your heart divided up and placed in their little bodies. Even the smallest inconvenience or pain that they feel is difficult to endure because they're a part of you. This sense of solidarity with my children wasn't due to my holiness or my capacity for empathy; anyone who knows me well knows that I lack both. But as a dad, it breaks your heart to see your child hurting.

My knowing that the pain is temporary, or that the monsters they fear aren't real, doesn't lessen my compassion for my children. For the first few weeks after Ellie was

born, we had to return daily to the hospital to get her blood checked as doctors monitored her jaundice. Each day we'd have to hold her tiny feet so they could prick her heel for the blood sample. It was horrible. Ellie was fine throughout the very short ordeal, but Courtney and I could barely take it. This little girl that we had just welcomed into the world was in pain and all we could do was watch. Despite knowing that the blood tests were for Ellie's good and that the needles were ultimately helping her, it was still heart-wrenching to witness as parents. Even my distracted, selfish heart hurts to see my kids in pain. If my imperfect father's heart is so moved to see my kids suffering, how much more must God the Father's heart be moved with compassion for us.

Shortly after Ellie's first birthday, we were overjoyed to find that Courtney was pregnant again. It was still early in the pregnancy, and while we knew that miscarriages are fairly common in the first trimester, we were devastated when an ultrasound revealed that this baby no longer had a heartbeat. I think neither Courtney nor I realized how emotionally invested we were in the idea of this child when we walked into the doctor's office that day, but the sad news brought waves of grief and loss that rocked us to the core. Facing the reality of death, no Christian clichés were helpful. We were left with so many unanswered questions and there was no silver lining to lessen the grief. It was heartbreaking to see Courtney bear this great burden of pregnancy only to lose the child, and as a father I felt completely powerless.

I don't share these stories to impress or to gain sympathy; we know close friends and family members who have faced far more significant suffering. For some it's meant burying their children, while others carry the weight of being unable to have children despite all the prayers and sacrifices they've made. Several years ago, I asked my dad about what he and my mom went through in losing my sister, Anne Clare, who passed away just one month after being born. My dad teared up and responded that the experience gave him a glimpse of what God the Father must've endured in watching Jesus die on the cross. At the time, this made no sense to me.

I had always thought of the Father sending His only Son as some cruel punishment. It seemed to me that God the Father simply watched from a safe distance above as Jesus bore the cross and endured death for our salvation. My experience of fatherhood has radically changed my understanding of the incarnation, Christ's coming

to earth to enter into our humanity and to redeem us through His death and resurrection. If my imperfect fatherly heart breaks to see my children suffer even in small ways, how much more must God the Father's heart have broken to see His perfect Son suffer and die to save people who had rejected His love.

In the midst of suffering, the providence of God remains a mysterious but evident reality. The puzzle analogy I spoke of earlier works to an extent, but like all other analogies, it falls short in some areas. I don't believe that our miscarriage, my sister's death, or my dad's cancer was just God handing us puzzle pieces and saying, "Here you go, good luck with this one." I don't like the phrase "everything happens for a reason" because it's not really helpful. Sometimes the cause of bad things happening is nature, sometimes it's a result of other people's decisions, and I fear that the phrase leads to us wrongly believing that God is using people and taking lives to teach us neat little lessons.

Rather, I am convinced that the Father is so committed to us that He can work through anything, and that He can bring good from any situation. The cross of Jesus bears witness to this reality; God turned our greatest act of rebellion into the source of all grace and the place of our reconciliation to the Father. I believe that God is a loving Father who knows our pain and weeps over us, and I believe that He doesn't allow our suffering to go to waste. Shortly after our miscarriage, I was running one morning and praying the sorrowful mysteries of the rosary. As I was reflecting on Christ's scourging at the pillar, I recalled the scene from the movie *The Passion of the Christ*. After the Roman soldiers had severely beaten Jesus, they led him away and Mary was left at the pillar staring at the pavement below covered in blood. She sank to her knees and with a towel soaked up every drop of Jesus' precious blood that had spilled on the ground. This was during a period where I felt like my and Courtney's suffering was simply in vain bringing nothing but sadness, grief, and tension to our marriage and home as we mourned the loss of our child. As I recalled the scene, I thought of how Mary worked to recover all of the blood that had poured from Her son. I was filled with hope that somehow God would not allow our pain, and our child's life, to be for nothing.

Five years later, we still wonder what our child would've looked like, sounded like, acted like. We still mourn the loss, but we've also seen fruit and progress in our

marriage as the shared suffering has deepened our faith and our bond with each other. Providence remains a mystery; some suffering is permitted while some is alleviated. Coming to believe in the Father's love has led me to begin to trust that somehow He can and will bring good from our suffering. God the Father perfectly loved His Son at every moment on earth, including those moments when Jesus hung on the cross on Good Friday. This conviction is only possible in the light of the resurrection, where we see that the Father never abandoned His Son but instead glorified Him. I am convinced that the Father's heart must break to see us, His children, suffer, but I am equally certain that Jesus' resurrection means that death no longer has the final word in our lives. In the words of Saint Teresa of Avila, a woman who knew suffering and experienced years of prayer where she felt nothing, "The feeling remains that God is on the journey, too."

No matter what we're up against, no matter how random our lives feel or how unable we are to make sense of the puzzle piece in front of us today, we can have confidence that our Father is tenderly and patiently loving us right now. Amidst our tantrums and our giving up, our frustration and our pride, He simply loves us too much to walk away. God knows what's ahead, He sees the entire picture, and He's absolutely committed to weaving together a good ending of our stories.

Chapter 14: Faith Like a Child

In the summer of 2016, our family had the opportunity to visit northern France to make a pilgrimage to the birthplace and tomb of Saint Therese of Lisieux. Courtney and I feel a great gratitude to Saint Therese for her intercession in our relationship, and as Ellie's patron saint (her middle name is Therese), we were eager to bring our children to Lisieux. At the time, Ellie was three and Francis had just turned one. As with all pilgrimages we've made with our family, the chaotic realities of the trip are nothing like the peaceful days of prayer and reflection that I imagine they'll be. No matter how holy the site, the kids are still kids. Every hotel room is a minefield in which any sound has the potential to obliterate any chance of sleep. All it takes is one cough, one car alarm, one noisy neighbor, or one inconsiderate dad who forgot to mute his phone as he watched an NFL playoff game, to wake everybody up.

We arrived at the Basilica of Saint Therese just in time to join a mass in English in the crypt of the church where the remains of Saints Louis and Zélie Martin, Saint Therese's recently canonized parents, are buried. Courtney was sitting with Ellie while I tried to restrain our now walking one-year-old son, Francis. At least for our kids, the first few months of walking are terrifying. The kids have no balance, very little depth perception, and no tolerance for any prohibition of walking at any moment. For Francis at mass that day, it wasn't enough to walk on the floor. He insisted on walking on the pew benches, though I did my best to keep him in the row we had chosen for mass.

I had read a few books on Saint Therese prior to this trip, but I felt like I still didn't quite grasp the "Little Way" that she was so famous for. I prayed earnestly that this pilgrimage would include learning more about Saint Therese and internalizing her message and her unique approach to holiness. But how was I supposed to learn about holiness, and how could I ever find time to pray when my son was acting like a toddler and not giving me a moment's rest? As mass continued and Francis was still flailing up and down the pew, I felt like I was failing both as a parent and as a pilgrim.

Midway through the mass, Francis decided that he had graduated from walking and was ready to take flight right there in the pew. He started launching himself, as

much as a one-year-old can possibly launch anything, over the back of the pew. I caught him immediately and set him back in his seat, only to have him run-walk to the other end of the pew and launch himself again. It was like the kid had no regard for the inherent dangers, no fear of gravity, and no doubt that he'd be fine because he knew I'd catch him.

Cue the angelic music. It finally started to make sense. Saint Therese of Lisieux's radical trust in the Father consisted in her profound confidence that God would accomplish in her soul what she alone couldn't possibly achieve. Saint Therese stands out for her expectant trust that she could throw herself into the arms of her loving Father, fully confident that He would catch her. "To remain little is to recognize one's nothingness, to expect everything from God, as a little child expects everything from his father."¹ The Lord showed me, through my son's wildness, what it looks like to truly trust in God the Father. I'm sure that mass isn't the best place for toddlers to attempt flying, and I can proudly say that I've grown in my ability to restrain my children in church, but I know that I needed to see Francis' fearless confidence to learn what it means to place more trust in God's love than I do in my fears and my limitations. Toward the end of her autobiography, Saint Therese describes the utter confidence that she had in God's merciful love: "I feel that even had I on my conscience every crime one could commit, I should lose nothing of my confidence: my heart broken with sorrow, I would throw myself into the Arms of my Savior."² So often I hesitate to even reach out my hand to God asking for help, and yet we are invited to wholeheartedly place our entire lives in His loving arms.

My faith is usually more like an insurance plan than a radical act of trust. Confident in my own selfishness and unsure of God's provision, I reach for so many lifelines just in case God doesn't come through for me. I wish I could say that I stopped caring about worldly things when I got serious about following Jesus, but my faith in God the Father falls far short of Francis' confidence in my ability to catch him. My children wake up expecting us to give them whatever they ask, even if their requests

¹ Therese of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*.

² *Ibid.*

are ridiculous or impossible. Yet I hesitate to ask for much in prayer, either worried that my requests are annoying God the Father or unconvinced that He could still perform miracles today. How different my spiritual life, and my life in general, would be if I had half of my kids' confidence when I asked God the Father to provide for me.

Living in Europe, we're blessed with the opportunity to travel frequently as a family. While I come up with locations I'd like to explore and cheap flights to get us there, Courtney excels in the practical planning. I dream of all the exciting foods we'll get to try, and Courtney remembers to bring diapers and clothes for the kids. We traveled to the Holy Land one winter, arriving in the beginning of January just as the Christmas crowds of tourists and pilgrims had left Jerusalem. I had been there before as part of a group pilgrimage, so for this trip I assured Courtney that me and my GPS were all that our family would need to get around. Other than a few inaccurate directions that left us in a suburban housing development looking for the Mount of the Transfiguration, the trip went pretty well. There was also an afternoon where my refusal to ask for directions led to us arriving in Cana after the churches had closed. Now whenever we think of the story of Christ's first miracle at the wedding in Cana, Courtney remembers locked doors and her stubborn husband. It sure was a romantic trip.

One advantage of visiting the Holy Land during an off-season for tourism is that there were no lines to get into the churches. We brought along a children's Christmas storybook to help explain the places we were visiting to Ellie, who was two at the time. One morning we went to the Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem, built over the spot where Jesus was born. Because we were the only people in the church, we were able to take our time and we didn't have to feel guilty for making noise as we explained the significance of the church to Ellie. We read the story to her and still had enough time to sing "Away in a Manger" together before leaving the church.

Later that day we walked through Jerusalem along the Via Dolorosa, the way of the cross. Our walk ended in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which houses both the site of the crucifixion and the empty tomb. This church wasn't quite as empty as the others we had visited, so we were trying to keep the kids quiet as we walked around inside.

We waited for our turn to pray and kiss the spot where tradition holds that the cross of Christ was located. After everyone had kissed the ground, Courtney and I started walking ahead but Ellie wouldn't budge. She started singing "Away in a Manger" once again and insisted that we join her. In this otherwise silent and solemn church, Ellie was singing full voice while Courtney and I whisper-sang to avoid the possibility of still louder reprimands from our daughter for our halfhearted participation.

Kids are so good at being present to the moment. Ellie wasn't caught up in what other people would think or the fact that no one else was singing Christmas carols when she decided to sing. So often I'm concerned about what others would think of me, and my children remind me what it looks like to freely be yourself. This freedom is wild at times and needs to be tempered with growth in prudence, but it's a far cry from our adult preoccupations with fitting in and appearing normal. Other than the random cries for chocolate or other late-night menu requests, our kids don't spend their nights riddled with anxiety over global instability or the trajectory of their lives relative to their apparently successful friend's recent social media posts.

Because their days aren't spent regretting the past or fearing the future, children show us what it looks like to fully invest in today. Their days are full of wonder and awe as they appreciate and take time to enjoy life's blessings much more than I do. One could argue that kids aren't anxious about the future because they're largely clueless about basic economic principles, but we adults should also humbly admit that even with all our knowledge and worries, we are unable to guarantee anything about tomorrow.

My children go to bed at night with no clue how life will come together the next day. Ellie may be thinking of tomorrow's outfit or Francis may be anticipating building something new with his Legos, but they're largely unaware of everything their lives depend on. They're not making shopping lists, arranging transportation, or filling the fireplace with wood at night before they go to bed. As far as the kids are concerned, it all just kind of works out.

I struggle to remain engaged in the present; it feels like I'm constantly distracted by what's coming up or what's on my plate for the next day. God knew that I'd need multiple daily, living, loud, messy, and needy reminders to be attentive to today. My kids are constantly all-in; they're fully and emotionally invested in whatever is going on at that moment, whether Ellie's playing with her dolls or Francis is protesting the inclusion of vegetables on his dinner plate.

I don't know exactly when the average person begins to feel the need to filter their speech, but I'm mostly grateful that none of my children have yet to reach this stage of development. I say mostly because occasionally their stream-of-consciousness dialogue leads to strange looks from other people. One Christmas morning, we had miraculously made it halfway through the liturgy with minimal noise and movement from the kids. I was just starting to feel a bit of confidence in our parenting skills when Francis noticed one of his friends sitting a few pews behind us.

At one and a half, Francis could correctly pronounce about seven letters of the alphabet. I promise he was innocently trying to simply say his friend's name, but Francis' mispronunciation of the friend's name just happened to sound exactly like a terrible word. It didn't help that this word rang out through the church at an otherwise quiet point in the liturgy. Courtney and I looked at each other in shock, instinctively horrified by the word and scrambling to figure out how Francis had possibly learned this obscenity. We finally realized the innocence of his mispronunciation, but unfortunately there's not really a clear point in the mass at which parents have a chance to explain their children's speech impediments to the rest of the congregation.

In the kids' minds, no question is off limits, and there's never a better or worse time to ask a question. Scars, hairstyles, and possibly pregnant women are all topics of conversation that simply can't wait until we're safely in the privacy of our home. Often our attempts to silence the outbursts are met with louder repetitions of the questions or comments. When the kids have a question, they ask it, no matter how uncomfortable the topic or how appropriate the setting. Fortunately for us living in Austria, our kids' embarrassing comments are always made in English in a predominantly German-speaking country.

Prayer time before we put the kids to bed is the best. They pray for whatever is on their mind, no matter how practical or realistic their requests are. Prayers are regularly offered for family members, for the conversion of cartoon villains, or for the whole of humanity with the exception of the one sibling that happened to offend them within the past few minutes. We continue trying to help develop the kids' understanding of prayer as they grow, but it is a lot of fun to hear how honest they are when they talk to God.

The way that my kids pray convicts me of how often I waste time trying to filter and find the perfect words as if I could impress God or hide my true feelings from him. The truth is that I'm often more honest with Google than I am with God. When I look online for an answer, I type exactly what I'm thinking into the search bar. When I pray, my tendency is to try to get the words exactly right before I'll say them. I try to sort through my feelings before offering them to God, forgetting that He already knows every thought, emotion, and movement of my heart.

When Jesus rebuked His disciples for preventing children from approaching Him, He said of the children, "the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Mt. 19:14). It's no coincidence that this passage immediately follows a scene where some Pharisees tried to trap Jesus with a question about divorce and remarriage. Christ reminds us of our posture before our Heavenly Father; we aren't as impressive and put-together before God as we pretend to be around each other. In the lives of the saints, we see an incredible variety of personalities and yet a uniform realization that humility is a non-negotiable when it comes to growing in holiness. There's a visible difference in the ways that children and adults approach others.

The Gospels record several scenes of impressive, knowledgeable, and well-respected men trying to trap Jesus with their theological questions and hypothetical scenarios. They all keep themselves at a safe distance from Him, refusing to commit to much more than a head nod or a "yes, that was well said" when Jesus responds to their tests. Yet in so many of the stories of healing found in the Gospels, we see the urgent straightforwardness of the humble men and women desperate enough to run to Jesus in their need.

Blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10) shouts at Jesus despite the crowd's insistence that he shut up, the Syrophenician woman (Mark 15) begged Jesus to heal her daughter even though she and her family weren't faithful Jews, and Martha and Mary (John 11) run to Jesus to let Him know how upset they are that He allowed their brother Lazarus to die. Like children, these people weren't embarrassed, afraid, or unaware of their needs. They had the courage to approach Jesus, despite the crowds and the awkwardness of it all, and their boldness was rewarded by Our Lord.

I think one of the biggest differences between children and adults, other than size, age, and relative desire for Pez candy, is the fact that kids are really transparent and they haven't yet figured out how to hide their dysfunction. Even in the ways that I see my kids misunderstanding or failing to trust in my and Courtney's parenting, our children's honesty and directness allow us to identify and address the issue immediately. My children make me a better man, and not just because of the patience I'm forced to learn in dealing with them. They live with a confidence and a freedom that I pray they never lose.

Being a dad has been an incredible gift. It's certainly been demanding as well; these little monsters claim every minute of my and Courtney's life from the moment they wake up till beyond the point at which they fall asleep. Life is completely different now than when I was single. My weekend plans have never been more lame, my own bedtime has never been so early, the music played in my house has never been so annoying, and I wouldn't trade it for the world. I can't get enough of my kids. When I look at them I see myself, I see my beautiful wife, and I am reminded of the incredible goodness of God that He would bring life from our love.

God the Father doesn't love us like we're His grown children back in town for a holiday meal. He loves us with the love of a dad holding His newborn for the first time. Toward the end of the Bible we read, "See what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God. Yet so we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we shall be has not yet been revealed. We do know that when it is revealed we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3: 1-2).

From the beginning, the story of humanity is one of a Father who will stop at nothing to rescue His kids. The Father loved us so much that He sent Jesus to redeem us, and He loved us so much that He sent the Holy Spirit to teach us that we are His children. I am convinced that everything changes when we know the love of God the Father. We're not orphans left to fend for ourselves or slaves constantly in fear of punishment. We are loved intensely, we are known personally, and we are held tenderly by our heavenly Father. If I'm overwhelmed by my imperfect, distracted, and still selfish love for my children, the Father's love for us must be beyond words.