

Over the course of hearing many confessions, typically one of the things that comes up so often is family life. Saint Paul in our second reading implores us to put on “heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience” and to bear with one another and forgive one another. But, as we all know, that can be quite a challenge. As kids we often have blow ups with our siblings; we argue with one another as adults too, and families can have all kinds of problems of animosity, of people making bad choices or saying hurtful things, while then also having so many great memories too. However, one of the things I’ve found both in being a part of a family, and also celebrating so many funerals over the years where the children and grandchildren share stories about their loved ones, is that while it takes work because we things that are often quite unlovable, in the family when we take Paul’s words to heart and are patient, so much good can come in the long haul.

In sharing a story about her blended family, Ramona Watson writes of having a Brady Bunch situation where they had suddenly a stepfamily with 13 children. The year they were married, they had 5 weddings - their own and four of their children’s - and they already had more than a dozen grandchildren. The process of blending families she notes can present a lot

of challenges that increase with the number of people involved, and for her family, it was a circus to say the least.

When they married, her husband was still deeply grieving the death of his first wife, and she faced 10 stepchildren who had recently lost their mother. She and her husband knew they faced some challenges, but they weren't prepared for the tsunami that was to hit their family, threatening its very foundation. It broke their hearts when their youngest son decided to leave their home before he graduated high school. They were thankful they had loving friends who provided him refuge during those difficult times.

They often found themselves locked in conflict with their children. Ramona says she knew that if they pulled together instead of apart, and prayerfully asked for God's help, they could find solutions to their problems.

The hard part she says was praying, as she was so angry with some of the people in her life. She writes that when she prayed, her prayers were mostly about asking God to fix everyone else. But it just didn't work, and she felt devoid of God's spirit. It was a very scary and lonely time.

Sometimes in times like she was going through, she notes taking offense and seeking revenge feels like the right thing to do when you're in the thick of things with someone. It was that way for her family at the time. The natural response to hurtful comments and unkind behavior is to do just that. But Ramona says she quickly learned the destructive power of those "natural" responses when they saw their conflicts becoming deeper and longer-lasting. She knew her family needed to find another way to deal with their differences if they hoped to keep the family together.

Being devout Christians, they were drawn to the scriptures to find answers to their conflicts. Over and over again, they were reminded of the necessity to "love your neighbor as yourself" and to "love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you."

Those words pierced Ramona's heart. But how many of us, she asks, when we are in deep conflict, have the self-control to step back and try to see our enemy as a friend? She realized that is exactly what she had to do. So, once again, she turned to the Lord for help.

Her prayers began to change, and she began asking for help in softening her own heart. As she drew up enough courage to look within herself instead of blaming her stepchildren, she discovered much that didn't belong there. She found that the way she was responding to things they were doing was only making matters worse. So she began thinking about practicing acts of kindness toward them instead of plotting revenge.

One day, she knew that her stepson, who was away at college, was having his wisdom teeth pulled. She called a local grocery store in his neighborhood and arranged for them to deliver him some cartons of his favorite ice cream and boxes of Popsicles. She had them enclose a note saying she hoped he would feel better soon and told him she loved him and was thinking about him. It was signed "From your Wicked Stepmother." this was the last thing he expected from her, but it made an impression on him. And more importantly, it changed something in her.

Another time, soon after that, Ramona and her husband showed up on her stepdaughter's doorstep early one Saturday morning with tools to wallpaper her two-year-old triplet's bedroom. She seemed to be having the hardest

time of all dealing with the death of her mother, and Ramona's heart ached to be able to comfort her in some way.

Things had been especially volatile between the two of them for a long time, and showing up to redecorate her children's room was the last thing she expected from them. Ramona had hoped that their service to her would cause a change in her attitude toward them, but she never expected the profound change that occurred in her own attitude toward her.

As Ramona worked in her home that day, she began to feel what it must be like for her with 3 little toddlers, while homeschooling her other three children. She realized how overwhelming and exhausting it must be for her to do everything she had to do to care for them. As she began to see her in a new way, all the bad feelings evaporated, and she was filled with love and a deep respect for her.

An amazing thing happened as she changed her way of responding to her stepchildren. Even though she hoped the acts of kindness she was showing them would soften their hearts, she soon discovered that she was in fact the one who was changing. Their behavior soon lost its sting, and

she was able to see past their rejection and look into their hurting hearts instead. Then she set about trying to find ways to heal their hurt. As she did so, she could feel the healing in her own heart.

That is when, Ramona says, she learned the greatest lesson about love: love is a decision before it is a feeling. once she decided to truly “love” her stepchildren, by overlooking the hurtful things they were doing and by looking into their hearts, she became healed. As they found the courage to do what they already knew to do, the miracle happened, and their broken hearts and broken relationships began to mend.

She received a letter from her stepson shortly before he returned from his mission for their church - the one who couldn't live at home and had to move out because of the unresolved issues between them - the one she had prayed for for five years, and whom Ramona struggled in every way to gain as a friend. He wrote:

I just wanted to take a moment to thank you for all the support you have given me on my mission. I honestly have no bad feelings from what has happened between us. You have been my greatest supporter on this

mission, and a lot of my enthusiasm came from knowing that you were always there, being such an incredible help.

I may have told you this before, maybe not, but one time, shortly after my mother died, I was sitting in a youth group meeting, and the speaker said, "The person who will write you the most faithfully on your mission is your mother." I knew that this was not the case with me because my mother was quite beyond the realm of writing to a missionary. I figured communication on my mission would be pretty slack and that I would miss my mother fiercely. In my notes, I still have written in saddened black pen, "Not I, said the cat!"

But the speaker was quite correct. You get the award! You have indeed written me the most faithfully throughout my mission. Thank you forever for your support. Although you may not be my mother, I will always be your son.

At the conclusion of her story, she shares that all 13 of their children are now married and raising their own families. Their ranks have grown from 12 to 40 grandchildren with more on the way. Though there are still some

rough edges that come up from time to time, they are getting better at working through them by taking Saint Paul's words to heart, working through them to the love on the other side.

This is something we all strive to do. But how can it be done? Of course that's the subject of many self-help books, but I think there are a few key things we can do as we strive to live out those words.

First and foremost, we pray. There is prayer within a family where a family prays for loved ones or gathers together for prayer; I remember doing that every night as a young child before going to bed. But when we pray on our own, we can gain insight and strength. As Ramona shared at the start of her story, prayer was tough because she at first wanted God to just fix everyone else; but as she prayed and sat with the Scriptures more, she gained wisdom and insight. When we do that, this can help us too. We can gain strength for dealing with challenging people or tough family situations learning what to say, or what not to say. We can also like her realize maybe we are part of the problem and the solution too; maybe we learn it's time to be more flexible, to let a child spread his or her wings, or a parent learns they are too overbearing or ignoring a problem that needs to be addressed;



we learn maybe that now is the time to forgive, or to try something new.

Prayer does so much to help us.

Second, we listen. We listen to God, we listen to our conscience, but also to what others are saying - and not saying. In Ramona's situation, her family loved her, but there was pain from loss; maybe pain thinking she was taking the place of a mother. Sometimes a person is going through something tough like an addiction or stress at school or work or peer pressure or feeling like they live in the shadow of another sibling; so what we see on the surface is covering up something deeper. It's so easy to give quick advice or to shut down an argument by retreating or walking away or saying "enough go to your room" to a child, but real listening takes work. When we do, we gain insight as to how to handle things.

Third, we are patient. How easy it would be for Ramona to have just given up on relationships with her stepchildren; but she knew that with time, things could improve. It's tough when things take time, like trying to heal a relationship, help someone see a better path they should take, or to find God in their lives again. Rome wasn't built in a day and neither are saints.

But when we don't give up, in time, the Holy Spirit can do so much good in a person when we join with the Spirit in helping grace to take effect.

Fourth, we forgive. How many family situations happen where a person digs in their heels, and waits for the other to make the first move. Of course there are situations where a relationship needs to end such as in abuse, or if a person is so toxic it's just not possible to go on. But more often than not, when we refuse to forgive we lose time, which is something we can't get back. So making the effort to send the email, pick up the phone, and work through things can bring such peace to ourselves and others if only we take that step.

Fifth, we challenge. No prophet is without honor except in his homeland, how true that is. But most of us have people in our families who deep down aren't really happy. They are convinced the Church is backwards and we should do what we want so don't want to listen to teachings on faith and morals. Or maybe they are convinced their addiction brings them happiness. Or they make excuses about why God doesn't matter. Or that they are doing no wrong as a parent or spouse, or that their parents are the problem and they've become prideful. We respect free will, but we also

need at times to be like the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future to Scrooge; to gently guide people with love; to challenge them even if they get prickly or defensive; to help them see the path to true happiness.

Lastly, time. How busy we can all be, but the gift of time is one of the greatest gifts we give to our families. Just being present for a meal, a conversation, family game night, or listening to them. It's one of the things I cherish so much about my childhood; mom and dad were busy, but they were there to help me with homework, and also to go to the park or go for a bike ride with, and today we continue that as I visit home often for a great meal, conversation, and a few games of cribbage. These moments mean much more to me than anything in a package I've gotten, and the same is true for all of us. Time passes by so fast; and we can't get the past back, but we can focus on the here and now by making the most of the time we have with our loved ones.

As Ramona's story goes to show you, our family lives are complicated. Family is the source of such great memories, but also such painful ones too, and most all of us are a part of both because we are human. Through it all though is the love of God to strengthen us and our families to make

them icons of the Trinity. As we begin a new year with new hopes and resolutions, let us all resolve to never take for granted the gift that is our loved ones, growing in holiness together as we make one another better and our loved ones do the same for us.