1

Child
Some years ago a relative of mine adopted a baby raccoon. Herbie was its name. Herbie was the cutest, most cuddly little creature imaginable. He was hooked on oreo cookies. Because Herbie was fed an ample, high calorie diet, he grew rapidly into a rolly-poley prankster. We had been warned that raccoons go through a glandular change at about two years of age and often attack their owners. A 30- pound raccoon can be equal to a 100-pound dog in a scrap. But our response was: "It will be different with Herbie. He is just too tame, too friendly, too domesticated to ever change that much." But we were wrong. One day he tried to bite a little boy who was petting him. After three or four more ugly incidents of misbehavior, Herbie had to be released into the woods. "Some people get caught having doing something wrong, but if one is really shrewd, no one will ever know." The devil is an ingenious salesman. Just as he once enticed Adam and Eve with forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, he still entices us. Seldom does the devil challenge us to openly defy God. The Evil One is more subtle than that. He just suggests that the Bible's warnings are hysterical overreactions. "Don't worry," says the devil. "You are different from the common folks who are dumb enough to get caught. God hates sin, not because He is hooked on rules, not because he wants to prevent us from having fun. God hates sin because He knows it can wreck us mentally, physically, and spiritually in this world, and send us to hell forever.  wonder what the snake looked like in the Garden of Eden. This was before it started slithering around on its belly. The snake could talk. It was shrewd, crafty, and quick, about as mentally agile as a young man I heard about who worked in a grocery store. One day a lady came in and asked for half a great fruit. The young man went to the back of the store and said to his manager, "There is some nut out there who wants to buy half a great fruit" then, glancing over his shoulder he noticed that the lady was right behind him, so he added, "And this gracious lady is willing to buy the other half."

The manager was much impressed. Later he said to the young man, "You know, with that quick mind of yours, you could go far in this business. By the way, where are you from?" The young man said, "I am from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, the home of great hockey teams and ugly women." with a distinct coolness, the manger said, "My wife comes from Lancaster." The young man replied, "And what hockey team did she play on?"

Somehow the devil had charmed and captivated the snake. The snake had become his mouthpiece. He asked Eve an apparently innocent question, "Did God say you shall not eat of any tree in the garden?" Behind that question were some devilish suggestions, like "Are God's rules necessarily in your best interests?" "Could God be causing you to miss out on something fantastic?"

*Adult*

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Today’s first reading presents the events immediately following Adam and Eve’s sin. Remember now God wasn’t concerned about fruit. He was concerned that Adam and Eve not experience evil. But He gave them free will so they could choose. How else could they love? All love is a choice. You husbands and wives know this very well. You have to choose to love each other every day. The deep sadness is that Adam and Eve used their free will to choose themselves instead of choosing God. They chose selfishness and disobedience. Their pride led them to choose evil. They believed the serpent who told them that if they disobeyed God and ate from the tree they would be like gods themselves.

The scene we have today begins with God finding Adam hiding, embarrassed because he was naked. His experience of evil had left him self-conscious and vulnerable. Then the blame game begins. Adam blames Eve for his state. She blames the serpent. This is so typical of evil. The person who does evil is always looking to implicate other people rather than accept his responsibility for the evil deed. In the Catholic Church we teach our children to take responsibility for their misdeeds as soon as they are able to distinguish right from wrong. That is why we have First Penance at 7 years old. By doing this we are teaching our children to fight against evil.

Back to the Garden of Eden. As a result of Adam and Eve’s actions, sin and death came into the world. The first battle of the war against evil was won by the devil. But God would achieve the final victory for mankind. He tells the devil about another woman, a new Eve, who would have a Son that would smash the serpent’s head. Enmity, war would be waged between the serpent’s followers and the women’s son and His followers.

Jesus speaks about this war in today’s Gospel. He is accused of using the power of the devil, Beelzebul, the Lord of the Flies, to perform his healing. This is the blasphemy that can’t be forgiven: believing that Jesus does not have the power of God, but the power of the devil. Then in the passage referring to Jesus’ physical family, Jesus proclaims that those who perform the will of God have an intimate relationship with Him. They are the opposite of Adam and Eve. For the followers of Jesus the relationship with God is more important than anything the world or the devil could offer.

Jesus came to wage war against evil. His followers are to join Him in this battle for the Kingdom. That is what we are called to do. Religion is not just a matter of going to Church on Sundays. Religion is about war, the war against evil. “Do not assume that I have come to bring peace to the world. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword,” the Lord says in Matthew 10:34.

And so we must engage the enemy. He is fighting us by promoting hate. We have to counter with love. Neo-Nazis, Klu Klux Klanners, and other White Supremacists, have gotten it into their feeble minds that they are the true Americans, and the rest of us are a blight to the country as well as the whole human race. We cannot just stand by and witness their hatred. We have to stand up for those they are attacking, be they people of color, non Christians, or the stranger/immigrant among us. War needs to be waged, and we need to wage it. We cannot turn away when we witness the haters spewing their evil. We have to proclaim the truth of Jesus Christ, the Son of God who was also the son of Mary, a Semitic Jew.

The enemy is fighting us by promoting crass selfishness. The concept that anyone could live for something greater than themselves is foreign to the serpent’s minions. By declaring that “All that matters is taking care of number one, myself,” the devil condemns those who believe this lie to a life where nothing matters. We wage war on this concept by living for eternal values. We put the needs of others before our own wants, and, sometimes, even before our own needs. We trust in God to take care of us while we take care of those who reach out to us.

Archbishop Broglio spoke of Blessed Rosario Livatino, a Catholic judge brutally killed by the mafia in 1990, was beatified.Pope Francis commended the beatification of the young judge, calling him a “martyr of justice and faith” which is a new classification. “In his service to the community as an upright judge, he never allowed himself to be corrupted. He strove to judge, not to condemn, but to redeem,” Pope Francis said. “He always placed his work ‘under the protection of God;’ for this he became a witness of the Gospel until his heroic death. May his example be for everyone, especially magistrates, an incentive to be loyal defenders of the law and liberty,”

To this day people chose to give witness to Christ and accept death, so that those who come after them could look at their witness and embrace the Catholic Church. All the martyrs of all ages did exactly that. They challenged evil to do its worst to them because there was something and Someone infinitely greater than themselves. They placed our need, our need for witnesses to Christ, before their own needs.

The enemy is fighting us by using God’s gifts against us. All that God has made is good, but good things can be used for evil purposes. Whenever we take a stand for morality, we are taking a stand against the perversion of good by evil. When we decide not to go to that party where we know that social drinking will quickly descend to drunkenness and to using drugs, we are taking a stand against evil. When we fight for the moral use of God’s gift of sexuality, we are putting up a fight for that which is holy and good and against that which is perverted and evil.

The old catechism used the term Church Militant. Those who were confirmed were told that they were soldiers for Christ. Perhaps some misunderstood this concept to refer to battles against other people. Our war is not a war against other people. Our war is against evil, against the serpent and against all who fight for the devil.

Be sure of this: there is a war which is being waged. And we, as followers of Christ, have no choice but to be involved. There will be skirmishes in every one of our lives. There will be times that we might think we are losing. We are not losing. The outcome of the war is certain: in time, in God’s time, the Son of God will crush the head of the serpent.

2 Desaino

As I lay in pain with my leg broken in three places, the doctors calmly described how healing happens.  Blood fills the cracks between the broken bones.  Then the blood hardens.  Once this happens, the cells of the blood are gradually replaced by bone cells.  This is how the body repairs itself in a marvel of self-healing.  Too bad not all healing is as efficient as this.

I’m talking about the brokenness of the human heart.  Someone asked me on Facebook last week if I thought that humans understood how much they need salvation.  It made me think.  While we know well enough all the problems that exist in our lives and around the world, probably most humans think that we can fix ourselves.  Science, technology, Artificial Intelligence, biology.  But the more we think this, the more we prove we are wrong—whether from these terrible wars we see, or hundreds of thousands who have to flee their homeland, or climate change, or our own personal struggles with sin.

Our first reading gives us the image of Adam.  Most of us think of Adam as some ancient figure that swung from tree to tree in the Garden of Paradise.  We fail to see Adam’s true sin—not eating a piece of fruit but profoundly failing to trust God and wanting to become God ourselves.  Good luck with this!  Our Catholic teaching is that we do need to be fixed, profoundly fixed, and only God can do it.

That is the Good News we read in the second reading as St. Paul is writing to the Corinthians.  God came to us in Jesus, took on our brokenness and death, rose in victory from the dead, and now bestows this Spirit of victory upon us through the grace he pours in our hearts.  The remedy for our brokenness is the Spirit of new life that God gives us in Jesus Christ.  Whatever we have to go through, the victory has already been won.

This Good News can be hard to take.  It’s easier for us to be cynical about ourselves and think that we cannot help ourselves.  In the Gospel we see that even the relatives of Jesus didn’t know how to take his message; some of them thought Jesus was crazy!  But Jesus proclaims God’s victory over evil because he has taken down the realm of Satan from the inside.  The blasphemy of Jesus’ opponents was their refusal to see God’s salvation at work in Jesus right before their eyes.

We come together on Sunday to celebrate just this victory because we become one with the Risen Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit is renewed in us.  Christ’s broken body is risen; his spilled blood brims over with divine life.  Not only are we healed again, but we are sent forth from Mass to be agents of healing in the world.

We have heard Good News.  We ask the Spirit to make us Good News for our world today.

It was shocking and hard to believe when one of Hollywood's most handsome and athletic stars, Christopher Reeve, suffered an accident that paralyzed him from the neck down. In one tragic moment, a single centimeter in the wrong direction, he was left a quadriplegic. Ironically, during those years when he was living in a wheelchair, most of us still associated him with his most famous role, that of SUPERMAN. In an interview years after the accident, Christopher Reeve and his wife, Dana, talked about the ordeal and the love that kept them together with columnist Liz Smith.

Smith asked Reeve a painful question, "During those times in the night when you woke up and faced reality, did you go through a major depression? Did you ever want to die or pull the plug?"

Christopher Reeve answered, "No. Four days after the injury, I came to, and first realized my situation. Dana and I were alone in the hospital room. This was before the operation, and the doctors said I might not pull through. I remember saying to Dana that maybe it wasn't worth the trouble, maybe we should just let me go. If Dana had looked at the floor or taken a pause, it would have been difficult because I would have thought, She's just being noble. But without missing a beat, she looked me right in the eye and said, But you're still you and I love you.' And that saved my life right there. That put an end to any thought of giving up. Then my three kids came in ” besides Will, I've got Alexandra, who's 12, and Matthew, 16. And I asked myself, How can I possibly leave them?' Of course I've had moments of feeling sorry for myself. I look at pictures of our boat and at people who can walk up stairs, and I think I've been dealt a lousy hand. But through it all, I never had any thoughts of suicide. (1) Where does Superman draw his strength? From his wife and children.

What does it take to make a family?

Mark tells us about a most unusual event in Jesus' life. Jesus was not very far into his ministry. Already crowds were starting to gather wherever he taught. He was in a house teaching one day when members of his family showed up. They had come to take him back home because, Mark tells us, they had concluded that he was out of his mind. We know Jesus' devotion to his mother, Mary, and her devotion to him, but evidently Jesus' new found fame was taking a toll on his relationship with his brothers.

Jesus' family was standing outside the house. Someone told Jesus, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you." "Who are my mother and my brothers?" Jesus replied. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother." Interesting. That sounds a little cold. We are accustomed to encountering family strife in the Old Testament. Cain and Able. Noah and his family. Jacob and Esau. But Jesus? There were problems in Jesus' family?

ALL FAMILIES HAVE PROBLEMS. That is the first thing that is obvious in our lesson. If Jesus and his family experienced tensions, it ought to take the rest of us off the hook just a little bit. All families have their headaches and their heartaches. Having a family is a challenge.

A father, fearing an earthquake in the region of his home, sent his two boys to stay with a distant friend until the peril was past. A few weeks later, the father received this letter from his friend: "Please take your boys home and send me the earthquake."

Some of us can sympathize. Children can be challenging ” children of any age. Some of you may remember a "For Better or for Worse" comic strip from a couple of years ago. The first three segments show the mother tossing and turning in her bed, worrying about their son, Michael. She says, "Are we too tough on Michael? Are we not tough enough? Do we give in too often? Too seldom? Do we listen? Do we understand? Maybe I nag too much. Am I a good parent? Where are the answers? How does one know what to do?" In the last box we see Michael lying awake in his bed saying, "The trouble with grown-ups is they think they know everything."

Surprise, young people. Parents don't know everything ” especially about raising children. That's what makes it so difficult. That is why so much of family life is trial-and error. Most parents do the best they can and then pray that it is enough.

It is particularly difficult being a family in today's world. Potentially the most sociologically significant change in our society ever may be that of the working Mom. Keeping families afloat financially has put new pressures on most families.

There was an interesting ad sometime back that reflects these pressures. "You could turn your child into a screen saver," read the ad. The ad was for "I See You" ” a system that allows parents of day-care children to peek in on their progeny via the World Wide Web while at work. The system, which leases out at $210 per month (plus Internet charges), takes still photos of the day-care center every 30 seconds and transmits the images to your personal computer. (2) Being a parent today is not easy. Many parents are not only stressed out. They are also heavy laden with guilt.

In March 1986, PARENTS MAGAZINE ran a feature article by freelance writer Terry Williams, in which she asked fifty mothers what they would do differently if given another opportunity to raise their children. Here is what three of the women in her sample revealed.

* One mother of a three-year-old would have chosen only one child care book to follow, rather than be confused by advice given in the dozens she now owned.
* Another young mother would have switched her pediatrician more quickly, having endured his disapproval for too many years. Her present doctor thinks she is a good mother.
* Finally, a working mother of two would have made herself immune to the guilt feelings she developed when others criticized how she raised her children. (3)

Having a family is not easy. All families have problems. If Jesus had problems in his family, I guess you and I can expect to have some problems in ours.

THE SECOND THING WE OBSERVE IN OUR TEXT IS THAT JESUS REDEFINED WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A FAMILY. A family is not so much defined by its bloodlines but by the love and respect members have for one another. Mutual commitment is more important than shared genes. "Who are my mother and brothers?" Jesus asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers!" Jesus was expanding the concept of family beyond the concept of blood kin. Biology is such a small part of parenting.

One of the major worries in adoptive families today is, "What happens when our child starts asking about his biological parents?" Many adopted children spend years tracking down their so-called natural parents. Only someone who has been adopted can probably appreciate that strong urge.

Still, it must be said that biology is the least important part of a family relationship. Almost anyone can produce a child; it takes a person of deep commitment to truly parent a child. YOUR FAMILY CONSISTS OF THOSE PERSONS WHO HAVE COMMITTED THEMSELVES TO BE THERE FOR YOU. Maybe these are persons who were responsible for bringing you into the world, maybe not. Adoptive parents can be your true parents in every sense of the word. For that matter, you can be living with your biological parents and find that they are not committed to you at all.

A major financial magazine recently published interviews with the "100 most successful executives" in the country. Most of these successful executives are devoted to their families. However, listen to a comment from one man who has made the "top 10." "Reaching the level of business success that I have requires total commitment," he says. "If your family is too demanding," he continues, GET A NEW FAMILY. That's what I did . . ." (5) Amazing ” but not all that rare. There are many walkaway parents in this world. And some who do not walk away physically do so psychologically. That is why it is so refreshing to read about parents who are committed to their kids.

In a recent issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN, Elaine Milsark wrote about her father. "When I was growing up," she says, "my dad worked long hours and missed most of my school activities. But when I joined the high school band, he said he'd be there for every game. He was true to his word until one Friday night during my senior year. His flight home from a business trip was landing fifty miles away at game time. I knew my mom would be alone in the stands. Yet, as the band marched onto the muddy field in the pouring rain, I happened to look outside the fence and noticed a figure in a wet trench coat holding a dripping umbrella over his head. I knew at a glance it was my dad. He'd arrived at the stadium just before half-time. It was too late to buy a ticket, but that didn't prevent him from keeping his promise. He was there, just like he said he'd be. And it's still that way with my dad. He's always true to his word." (6)

Wow! Does anyone doubt that Elaine's Dad is committed to her? Do you think it would have mattered if he had been her biological father or not? He always kept his promises to her. That brings us to a final observation from our text. It concerns the role of character in the family. "Whoever does God's will," says Jesus, "is my brother and sister and mother." GOOD PEOPLE MAKE GOOD PARENTS. People of questionable character make questionable parents.

Kimberly E. Davis tells how her brother once snooped through their father's drawers. Instead of some dark secret ” a friend had found pornography in a similar hunt ” David found his father's prayer journal. On every page was David's own name. That proof of their father's integrity, says Kimberly ” that he was as he appeared ” affected her brother deeply. (7)

I suspect that this where many parents fail ” it is at the level of their personal character. Their implicit message to their children is "Do what I say, not what I do." And that message never succeeds.

James Dobson tells of his great-grandfather, George McCluskey, who invested the hour from eleven to twelve o'clock each morning in intercessory prayer for his family. He asked God to bless not only his children but also the generations yet to be born. Dobson then describes the fascinating way God answered that prayer in the lives of McCluskey's children and grandchildren: "There have been times as I have sat on the platform of a large church, waiting to speak," says Dobson, "that I have felt the presence of the old man . . . It staggers the mind to realize that the prayer of this one man, spoken more than fifty years ago, can reach across four generations of time and influence developments in my life today." (8)

Good people make good parents. All families have problems, but if your family is built on commitment and character, your chances of success are strong indeed.

In his best-selling book STRAIGHT TALK, Lee Iacocca put it this way:

"My father told me that the best way to teach is by example. He certainly showed me what it took to be a good person and a good citizen. As the old joke has it, No one ever said on his deathbed, I should have spent more time on my business.' Throughout my life, the bottom line I've worried about most was that my kids turn out all right.

"The only rock I know that stays steady, the only institution I know that works, is the family. I was brought up to believe in it ” and I do. Because I think a civilized world can't remain civilized for long if its foundation is built on anything but the family. A city, state or country can't be any more than the sum of its vital parts ” millions of family units. You can't have a country or a city or a state that's worth [anything] unless you govern within yourself in your day-to-day life.

"It all starts at home." (9) Well spoken. It all starts at home. Even Superman will tell you that.

1. "We Draw Strength from Each Other," by Liz Smith, Interview with actor Christopher Reeve and his family, GOOD HOUSEKEEPING, June 1996, pp. 87-88.

2. "Quotables," WORLD, Sept. 14, 1996, p. 10.

3. James M. Mannon, AMERICAN GRIDMARK (New York: Harbinger House, 1990), p. 7.

4. January 27, 1997.

5. Tim Kimmel, LITTLE HOUSE ON THE FREEWAY, (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1987), p. 31.

6. "Dads & Daughters," May/June 1996, p. 51.

7. "Shaping Your Children," LIGHT AND LIFE, May 8, 1996, p. 8.

8. James Dobson, STRAIGHT TALK TO MEN AND THEIR WIVES (Waco: Word Books, 1980), pp. 54-55.

9. Lee Iacocca, STRAIGHT TALK (A Bantam Book: New York, 1988), p. 17.

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