

Dear All,

Since we cannot share Atrium time, and I am aware that you all are finding new rhythms of being the Church at home, I wanted to send something to support you, with children, grandchildren, neighbor children, or cousins... whomever you are with! These are also rich reflections for adult formation, too. This is the kind of thing anyone can do with children, without it feeling or sounding inauthentic: moms, dads, grands, aunts, and uncles. You are their primary catechists.

After conferring with Margie, and with her blessing, I am sharing three scriptures presented from the Atrium for use in your devotional times with children. These require very little in the way of materials, which make them ideal for home use. The children have each received these presentations before, at least the first moment, but may like to revisit the material with their families as they prepare gardens and stay home during social distancing.

The Growing Seed - Mark 4:26-28

With even the youngest children, we ponder the mystery of the Kingdom of God is the mystery of life itself: exponential growth and transformation with no visible source. Although our participation in this mystery is crucial, we cannot grow and change merely by willing it. It is only the power of God that can bring about growth and transformation. The power of life within the seed is none other than the power of God. With this parable we ponder anew the Growing Seed, to see God's power in the smallest things, to sense our participation in the life of God. and to lift up the Kingdom as one of growth and harvest, where God is quietly at work.

The Parable of the Sower - Matthew 13:3-8 (see also Mark 4:3-8; Luke 8:5-15; John 15:16-17) With the older children we remember that through an abundance of the gifts of God and His strength of life, God initiates a covenant relationship with us. We are called to prepare and cultivate our "soil" so that God's life in us might grow and bear much fruit in the building of the kingdom of God. With this parable we proclaim and reflect on the abundance of life and gifts God gives and how it is important to prepare and cultivate our "soil" so that God's life might grow in us and bear much fruit in the building of the kingdom of God.

In pondering this parable I with your children, just focus on what's essential:

1) find a place where you can first be still, invite the child, who will eventually be drawn by your stillness (reverence, awe)

2) possibly light a candle, always invite the Holy Spirit in prayer or song

3) read the Scripture passage in a solemn way once (twice if possible), and ask, "What do you notice? What do you wonder?"

And that is all. He will do the rest.

I often need to be reminded of this. The other day, in the falseness of my rushing, I was irritated with our girls as we prepared the garden space. It was not unprovoked - there was whining and sloth on both counts, even though they completed what I'd asked. After running off to play with the boy who

also lives on our farm, I overheard them arguing with one another. I was relieved to be working "unencumbered," but knew there was a missed opportunity I might circle back for: the soil I was working was as full of rocks and debris as my own heart that day. As I considered how best to invite these three into the Parable of the Sower with me, I remembered that *all the material and physical space preparation of the Atrium is but for one purpose: that the adult would come to stillness, able to relax and relinquish control, so that the child would be invited with love and joy to come near to the Good Shepherd, on his or her own.*

As I pre-dug the 1-inch holes in rows for planting the peas, gathered small sticks to mark the rows and found the passage for the Parable of the Sower, I could hear "...you must become like a little child" over and over again in my head. When I called them (almost 6, almost 9, and just 10) over, I was kneeling in my old combat boots and re-purposed multi-cam pants, ones I'd deployed with. (Speaking with adults, I can say that the Parable of the Peaceable Kingdom continues to be realized inside of me, who was trained for war and yet am also a mother. The natures of the wolf and lamb in Isaiah's prophecy are both somehow inside of me - not yet at perfect peace with each other. I am, as you know, a human "sword" being beaten into a "plowshare!") The solemn reading began, "This parable is from the Holy Bible, recorded in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but today we'll hear it from the Gospel of Luke. What is a parable?" Our neighbor recalled that they are stories that tell us how to live, and my daughters added that some parables Jesus used to tell us about himself, and his Kingdom.

This kind of dialogue--this great, vulnerable pause, these simple words--did not come naturally to me at first, but I offer them to you, as one who has been gratefully taught a new way. Ultimately, the Holy Spirit will give you the words. Less is more! Asking "What do you notice, what do you wonder?" opens things up beyond belief. By the end of this reading and reflection, the kids were wondering how God's word (the seed) can grow in our hearts, and noticing what can get in the way of that. They noticed that attitudes, habits, and other people can interfere, or help it to grow. The work I invited them to do was just to hold several seeds in their hand, and we sang a Kingdom Song as we planted the rows. They did so, lingered, and eventually went their ways together to play. Their companionship was restored.

As a catechist, even though we school at home, I am always puzzling about how to find this sacred space at home, for spiritual formation with our kids. I am often not as patient here, as I am in the Atrium. Sharing this as encouragement, and in hopes that it will help you provide one or two meaningful encounters with our Lord's Passion and Death this week, looking forward to the celebration of his Resurrection!

Much love,
Heather

"The cost of a thing is the amount of life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run." - Henry David Thoreau, Walden