



'Light for the Path' a Resource for Families in the Year of Mercy

Session Three: The Lost Son, the Loving Father – a parable of Mercy

In the parables about mercy, Jesus shows us what God is like - a Father who never gives up until he has forgiven the wrong and overcome rejection with compassion and mercy.... God is always presented as full of joy, especially when he offers forgiveness. In these special stories we find the 'heart' of the Gospel and of our faith, because mercy is presented as a force that overcomes everything, filling the heart with love, making everything better through forgiveness. (adapted from Pope Francis, MV 9)

Step One: We Gather in a Welcoming Space

Decide on the best time, before or after school, evening or weekend.

Welcome everyone. It's good to be here! How has life been recently?

Background

The word mercy is '*hesed*' in Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament or first part of our bible. It is '*eleos*' in Greek – the languages of the New Testament, or second part of our Christian bible. Both these words have many different meanings in English, for example, compassion, deep loving kindness, forgiveness, or to relieve from suffering. 'Mercy' is a word that tells us something very important about God, and about ourselves – the attitude of 'mercy' is basic to our way of life as Christians. We cannot place limits on God, who is always ready to pour out his loving kindness; always seeking out the lost or waiting patiently for his loved ones to return, to welcome, embrace and forgive them. Mercy is the way God comes to meet us! It is the way God expects us to be as tender, compassionate and forgiving in our relationships, at home, at work, and in the wider community.

Step Two: We Look At Our Experience

We begin this session thinking about our lives, and what might be our own experience of going off the rails a bit (or a lot!), 'walking away', wanting to leave home, or rejecting members of the family – and how it feels to say sorry, and be forgiven.

- What for you are the most important things that help keep family life going?
- When you have big decisions to make, how do you make them?
- How do you handle disagreements between members of the family?
- Have you ever wanted to walk out or walk away when things get difficult for one reason or another?
- Have you ever had to let someone you love go away? What's it like when they've gone? What about when they come back? How do you welcome them back? How does it affect other members of the family?

In our Catholic Tradition

Home is the natural environment in which we love and accept one another, and give and receive tenderness, forgiveness, respect, fidelity and service (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2222).

The parables are 'stories' told in such a way to help us go deeper into the mystery of God – God's love beyond limits, and yet we are totally free to choose, no pressure, to accept or reject this love, and to give and receive this love between ourselves.

Pope Francis in his announcement of the Jubilee of Mercy said, '*the mercy of God is (like) that of a father or a mother, moved to the very depths out of love for their child... full of tenderness and compassion, indulgence and mercy*' (MV6)

Step Three: We listen – the Word of God (see pictures on back page)

At this step you might like to use the '*lectio divina*' guide in this resource. Invite someone to read the Word of God slowly, pausing after each verse or couple of verses. Ask everyone to listen and see what catches their attention. Either use a bible, marking the pages in advance (Gospel of Luke, Chapter 15, verses 11-31) or read from the text box below.

Gospel of Luke, Chapter 15 (verses 11-31) *The loving father, the lost son and the dutiful son.*

Then Jesus said, 'There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, let me have the share of the estate that will come to me'. So the father divided the property between them. A few days later, the younger son got together everything he had and left for a distant country where he squandered his money on a life of debauchery. When he had spent it all, that country experienced a severe famine, and now he began to feel the pinch; so he hired himself out to one of the local inhabitants who put him on his farm to feed the pigs. And he would willingly have filled himself with the husks the pigs were eating but no-one would let him have them. Then he came to his senses and said, 'How many of my father's hired men have all the food they want and more, and here am I dying of hunger! I will leave this place and go to my father and say, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired men'. So he left the place and went back to his father. While he was a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with pity. He ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him. Then his son said, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called you son.' But the father said to his servants, "Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the calf we have been fattening, and kill it; we will celebrate by having a feast, because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found." And they began to celebrate.

Now the elder son was out in the fields, and on his way back, as he drew near the house, he could hear music and dancing. Calling one of the servants he asked what it was all about. The servant told him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the calf we had been fattening because he has got him back safe and sound.' He was angry then and refused to go in, and his father came out and began to urge him to come in, but he retorted to his father, 'All these years I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed any orders of yours, yet you never offered me so much as a kid for me to celebrate with my friends. But, for this son of yours, when he comes back after swallowing up your property – he and his loose women – you kill the calf we had been fattening'. The father said, 'My son, you are with me always and all I have is yours. But it was only right we should celebrate and rejoice, because your brother here was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found.'

(Excerpts from The New Jerusalem Bible, Darton, Longman & Tod, 1985 ©)

Step Four: We Respond

- What caught your attention in this parable?
- Which bit did you like best, and can you say why? Which bit was most challenging?
- What does this story say about family, and the strength of our love for each other?
- I wonder, what does it tell us about God the Father?
 - **Did you know:** In biblical times, (and today) normally a person's land, home and belongings would not be shared out, as 'inheritance', until that person died! So in a way, the younger son asking for 'his share' was saying 'I can't wait for you to die! I want it NOW!' This was considered very disrespectful, and we can only imagine the chaos, anger and confusion this would have caused, not only in the relationships of father and 'lost' son, but brother with brother, and father with elder son too. Also, no doubt the event was seen as shameful by the neighbours and friends. However, the father's love for his son is stronger than any of these feelings, and he complies with the request, because he wants his son to be free to choose his way in life.
- I wonder, in what way does this parable echo with you? When have you or someone else in the family made poor choices, being greedy or selfish, putting their own needs first before considering the good of the whole family and the effect of their actions on everyone else? What happens?
- In your experience, what makes someone 'come to their senses'? What might they be 'hungry' for?

Step Five: We Mix it Together

Jesus says we are free to choose – a life turned out towards other, in loving relationship, with God and with our family and friends and those we meet, or a selfish life that's 'all about me'.

- I wonder what happens when we decide to come back to those we have hurt, and say we are sorry? What does it feel like to be forgiven? Or to forgive?
- What do you think is special about the love of a parent?
- I wonder what it's like as the elder brother? How might we see things differently? How do the father's words to the elder brother help here?

We are invited

- **At home:** To think about the different relationships in our family, and the ways we love, and say sorry and forgive one another. If there is any 'unfinished business', perhaps reflect on what we might do to heal that.

Step Six: What Might We Do Differently Or New This Week?

- Perhaps have a lovely family meal together, or spend some 'special' time with a member of the family who needs your attention.
- There may be a 'reconciliation' service or special 'Year of Mercy' event (e.g. 24-hours for the Lord) planned in your local area. You might like to go as a family to one of these and explore the different ways of praying 'thank you', and 'please' and 'sorry'.

Step Seven: We Pray

Leader:

Let's sit quietly for a moment, and remember the story and all we have shared together.

As we think about these things, we pray:

Thank you for being with us as we gather here in your name Lord Jesus. You have shown us what God the Father is like. Help us not to judge one another, and to be more kind, loving and forgiving when we make mistakes and hurt each other. May our families and homes be places where anyone can come and experience through us the Father's love and mercy for them. We make this prayer, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

God of Surprises! Here is another place where the word 'mercy' appears in the prayers of the Mass.

In the **Prayer of the Faithful**, sometimes called 'the Bidding Prayers' or 'Intercessions', the Assembly are asked to pray for the needs of the world, the church and the local community. These include all sorts of events, situations, and people that we want to ask God's love, mercy, healing and blessing for. After each intention, there is a pause, while everyone prays silently in their hearts. The reader then says: **Lord, in your mercy.** And everyone joins in with 'Hear our prayer'.



https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AGuercino_Return_of_the_prodigal_son.jpg



https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AReturn_of_the_Prodigal_Son_1667-1670_Murillo

Here are two pictures of the story of the 'prodigal son'. Which one do you like and why? What might it be like to be in this picture? Where would you be? Which character do you identify with? Imagine yourself in the story. What is your experience? What about the other characters – how do they respond to you?

- What is it actually like to be the son and feel the embrace of the father? What about being the Father, holding your long-lost returning son? How does the elder brother feel? What do you want to say to him? What might the elder brother do next?

When things have gone wrong, and you have made mistakes and hurt people, what do you expect or hope for when you come back to say sorry? Who might be there for you?