

## Edited reflection from ***Better by the Dozen Plus Two***

by James and Kathleen Littleton

One of my favorite gospels, one of my favorite reality checks, is in the Gospel according to Mark 4:35-41, NAB. It is the story about the disciples crossing the lake with Jesus asleep in the stern. "On that day, as evening drew on, Jesus said to them, 'Let us cross over to the other side.'" Yes, he wants us all to cross to the other side. But, there is a risk involved. There is a mystery involved. Perhaps it is evening; perhaps it is late. Maybe we are tired, but He wants us to cross to the other side.

"Leaving the crowd behind, they took him, just as he was in the boat." Yes, leaving the crowd. Leaving the opinion polls, political correctness, the dominant culture, the culture that says one or two children should be enough, acquire more things and you will be happy; the culture that insanely makes a god, an idol, a savior, a religion, an obsession out of politics; the dominant culture that says it's all about power, prestige, early retirement, spending your final years playing golf, taking it easy, and waiting to die. *Then what?*

We tend to want to be in control. We want all our ducks to be in a row before we venture out to give God what He wants in our lives. "Lord, let us win the lottery first!" "Let us have all our finances locked in to supposedly be secure that our current children and our possible next child have their private college education fully paid for, and then we will be open to life." Certainly we can apply prudence in our lives where prudence belongs, but what is often lacking in today's western culture is faith, and faith entails risk.

Surrendering our comfort zone to our Blessed Lord Jesus includes pain and purification, *but for our good*. We can not reduce the value of a human life to an illusory sense of control and assurance that we will be able to provide that child a college education and all the "things" we think he needs to be happy and fulfilled.

After all, we do not co-create with God persons who will be totally dependent and useless consumers. *No*, every person comes into the world with unique gifts to contribute for his own good and for the good of others, and that includes every person, even those with so-called disabilities and illnesses. It is supreme arrogance and lunacy to think that we parents alone somehow possess our children, and are responsible for them all on our own. We must give God His infinite due!

God wants to reach us with His truth and encouragement, even through examples that nature provides around us. What if the majestic trees of the forest were to say, "let us grow in greenhouses as potted plants where we will be safe and comfortable?" They would never mature. Their potential, their mission would never be fulfilled. No, they risk to let their seeds fall where they will and die. Those seeds then take root in the earth where there is dirt, vermin, death, pain, and darkness. Eventually the trees sprout up and reach up for the sun, to the life-giving sun and to the heavens. In order to reach for the sun, there must be a willingness to embrace the inescapable risks and challenges; and while they are reaching up and developing their full potential, fierce storms are mixed in with the sunny tranquil days.

*Life is tremendously short*. We need to step out, *put out into the deep* (see Luke 5:4), and make the most of this great gift. God is asking us to be generous in some way according to our possibilities. What is He asking of you? For many could He be asking your openness to having another child, if He so blesses you? You don't have to have fourteen today. Our Blessed Lord is just asking us to be open, to trust, to be open to having perhaps one more child for now, to make the best of the circumstances and opportunities He is blessing us with today; then to discern the possibility of having yet another child down the road, but never to shut God out of our decision making process, to never definitively marginalize His will. We must always be open to His will. He does not want us to *be potted plants*.

"They took him with them in the boat just as he was." We need to take Jesus with us. We need to be with the Lord, and we need to take Jesus just as He is, the Jesus Who loves us, the Jesus Who is Mercy incarnate; and the Jesus who is demanding, who wants the best for us, Who wants us to live life to the fullest without fear.

Our Blessed Lord wants us to put Him first, to be open to the children He wants to bless us with, to put Him and our families above things, above power, above prestige.

"And other boats were with him." And when we strive to fulfill our mission and gallantly venture out, putting God and His will first, others will be invigorated and emboldened. They will look to our example and find courage to take a risk themselves, to leave fear behind, and to begin to live their lives to the full.

"A violent squall came up and waves were breaking over the boat, so that it was already filling up." Sure, it can seem difficult to take risks, like a violent squall, to do God's will, to be open to having a larger family, to die to ourselves, to put our spouse and children before our own pleasure, things, and fears. But these are all opportunities to grow in faith, to grow in love, to exercise and augment our spiritual muscles.

None of us live selflessness perfectly, and my wife, Kathleen and I unquestionably don't; but God wants us to give our best effort each day, even though we fall short. The growth and love is in the effort and struggle. How could we ever love if there were no opportunities for difficulty or sacrifice? This is God's work. He is always there to help us.

"Jesus was in the stern, asleep on a cushion." Sometimes when we follow the Lord and make an effort to do His will it will seem like He is not there, as if He has abandoned us, left us to ourselves, as if He is unaware of our dire situation. But the truth is, *He is always there, aware of and supremely interested in every detail of our lives, always caring, and always in absolute command, even when He is asleep*. Venerable Archbishop Luis Martinez wrote a beautiful, extensive meditation on this very gospel passage. It has been printed in English under the title *When Jesus Sleeps*. It is a beautiful book, a beautiful meditation. I hope you will get a copy.

"They woke him and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?'" Yes, He cares, but He permits situations in our lives that take us out of our comfort zones.

These are opportunities for us to grow in love, faith, hope, and virtue; to be transformed more into Jesus. God is our infinitely loving Father. A good parent will not continue to hold his child's hand to cross the street as the child grows into his teens, twenties, thirties, and forties. A good parent knows when it is time to encourage the child to venture forth on his own.

When a parent teaches his child to swim, will the child not complain, "Don't let go. I'm afraid! I'll drown!" But, the parent helps and encourages the child to take the risk, and when the child discovers he can stay afloat on the water through his trepid, but gallant efforts, he is proud as can be! All along the parent was there to save the child if he went under, although the child could not perhaps perceive it at the time, being so preoccupied with his fears, challenges, and efforts at hand. The child would never develop, never mature, never be capable of any grand accomplishments unless the parent permitted him to take risks, to step out of his comfort zone, his bubble, to accomplish something.

*Our Heavenly Father is like this with us because He loves us, and is willing to do what is best for us regardless of our protests, thanks be to God. If it was up to us we would stay forever in our comfort zone, but God loves us too much for that; so He is always encouraging us through providential circumstances, events, disasters, and people in our lives to trust Him more, to take risks, to accept, and embrace difficulties and even tragedies in our lives, so we can grow and mature, and make the most of our lives.*

"He woke up, rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Quiet! Be still!' The wind ceased and there was great calm." Yes, the Lord, with a word can quiet a storm on a lake. And if we permit him, He can calm the worst storm, the Category 5 Hurricane that rages in our interior when we don't have Jesus in the boat of our soul. *Do you think there are storms in your life that are currently raging or yet to come that are beyond our blessed Lord's power? Be convinced, there is nothing that will ever happen or can ever happen that is beyond the power and control of our loving and merciful God. Listen, we are invincible when we take Jesus into our boat. Nothing can harm us when Jesus is in our boat, nothing! Don't doubt. Count on this!*

"Then he asked them, 'Why are you terrified? Do you not yet have faith?'"

Why do we not yet have faith, a real faith that is relevant to our daily lives? Why not yet? Why don't we sufficiently trust and believe in God? If we take the time to reflect, we will see the innumerable times that our merciful Father has cared for and protected us. We only need a little supernatural eyesight that is enhanced through prayer, and the sacraments, in order to be able to grasp this reality. How many times does our Blessed Lord have to intervene for us, to provide for us, to show His love for us, before we will stop the interior storm of being terrified, before we will truly have faith, a living deep faith that continuously permeates every aspect of our lives, before we will be free to live our life to its fullest joyful potential?

We need to ask God, to give Him permission to bequest us with an *unshakeable faith*. This is God's work, but we must offer Him our consent, and cooperate with His graces. *When much is given, much is expected* (see Luke 12:48). With this kind of faith *built on rock* (see Luke 6:48), we are capable of living our mission in life to the full for our good and the good

of others. We leave impotent mediocrity behind. What a magnificent adventure our life becomes when we leave fear behind and have faith.

"They were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this whom even wind and sea obey?'" *Who is this? It is Jesus, our Lord, our Creator, our Savior, and He is in command.* He knows what will become of us. He always wants our good, and will always arrange things for our benefit.

There is really only one power that can stand in the way of God's will. What is that power? What could we say is the power that is virtually equal to God himself? It is the power of a gift He has given us. This is an awesome, but fearsome power. And it is so powerful because it is so absolute. It is absolute because God himself has given it to us and He will never revoke His gifts. *He is faithful and true.* (see: Revelation 19: 1) And this gift, that will never be revoked, this gift that is so awesome and fearsome, is the gift of our *free will*.

This is why we must pray, and pray some more, for the grace of God's help to exercise this power, this free will in accordance with Almighty God's will. His will is always for our good and the good of others. And in order to exercise our free will in line with God's transcendent will, we must be a courageous, faith filled, grace filled people.

Really the safest way, the most efficacious way, to exercise this awesome and fearsome gift of free will is to surrender and abandon ourselves to God's most holy will. Then God will providentially, lovingly *rattle us* out of our confusion and fear. He will empower us to take risks for the good. He will give us His supernatural vision to fall in line with His perfect hierarchy of values, to put God and His things first, then our spouse, then our children, then our work and service. We have to die to our old selves and to be risen with Christ so we can *live Christ*. (see Philippians 1:21)

Kathleen and I have many times been challenged about the size of our family by people, even by relatives, who were often concerned and perhaps had the best of intentions. One of the greatest means of persuasion to help them understand that our choice to have a large family was right and good and in accordance with God's will would be to take out a picture of our complete family, or to point the children out if they are near by. Then I would ask which of these children should have been our last? Where should we have stopped? Which of these children should not have been born? Which of these children do you think has been brought into existence in opposition to God's will? I will ask this in a charitable tone. Although I have seldom, if ever, experienced the person who has challenged the size of my family declare that they were wrong, and that they were now in full agreement with our radical openness to life and trust in God, I believe my challenging premise does put things into perspective and cause the person to reflect more deeply on the subject.

I have yet to have someone answer this question by maintaining that Kathleen and I should have stopped at a particular child. This has never happened because of the grave reality that such a response would imply. By virtue of their failure to answer this question by selecting particular beautiful and unique children to have never existed, implies that the challenge to our family's size does not hold merit. To select a point at which we should have ceased the prayerful discernment and living of God's will in regard to openness to

life in our marriage, would be to imply that the children born after that point would have been better off not existing, and that the world is better off without them. How could anyone sincerely and in good conscience make such a statement?

*The whole idea of overpopulation is a myth.* Anyone who has flown in a plane or taken a drive in the country can clearly see that densely populated areas are minuscule compared to the vast, open, sparsely inhabited land. Look at the grave damage done to so many countries, especially in the western world, where the average completed family size is well below the replacement rate of 2.1 children. *There are grave societal and economic consequences of this.* The consequences being currently experienced are only the tip of the iceberg compared with those potentially to come.

One example is the growing percentage of elderly compared to younger working adults producing and paying taxes. There is an ever increasing motive in society to attempt to rationalize euthanasia. The prevalent culture of death, the abortion and contraception mentality, breeds more and more selfishness and self-centeredness in the individual and in society, which results in increased fear. This is a volatile and disordered recipe for evils such as abortion, euthanasia, and wars to flourish. Take this as certain.

When a culture pushes God's gifts and His will aside, it pushes God aside. When we are left to ourselves, we encounter disaster. God does not impose himself on us as He completely respects our free will, but we are made free in order to choose to do what we ought, to choose God and His will and truth. We cannot remain locked up in our fears and self-centeredness and expect to live happy and fulfilled lives. Although it can seem challenging and difficult to trust God, to take risks, to step out of our comfort zone, to do God's will, this is what truly brings us happiness, fulfillment, and peace.

I recognize that many parents who are trying very hard complain that they are struggling with perhaps one, two, or three young children, and are therefore very concerned about having another. I have nothing but compassion and love for them in their struggles and concerns. But I care about what is best for them, and I like to encourage these parents with the reality check that their young children will not always be little. The little ones do grow and become more mature, becoming more capable of helping around the house and with the new little ones to come. God really has thought all these things out in His great and generous plan for life. We have found also that as we have grown older, having less energy than when we were younger, God has blessed us with older children now who can appreciably help with responsibilities around the house and with the children.

How did we end up having nineteen children? Well I can assure you of one thing. We never would have had this many if it were not for the gift of our faith in God, a God who always provides what is truly necessary, a God who tells us not to worry: "Set your hearts on his kingdom first, and on his righteousness, and all these other things will be given you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow: tomorrow will take care of itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

(Matthew 6:16, JB)