

**“PRO-WOMAN, PRO-MAN, PRO-CHILD”**  
National Natural Family Planning Awareness Week  
July 21-27, 2013

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## HOMILY NOTES

### **Sunday 21 July 2013**

#### **SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

First Reading: Genesis 18:1-10a

*Lord, do not bypass your servant.*

Responsorial Psalm: 15: 2-3a, 3bc-4ab, 5

*He who does justice will live in the presence of the Lord.*

Second Reading: Colossians 1:24-28

*The mystery hidden for centuries has now been revealed to his saints.*

Gospel: Luke 10:38-42

*Jesus speaks with Martha and Mary.*

Martha and Mary were the perfect combination for hospitality – if only they could get along! Martha got the food ready, and Mary sat and listened to their guest. Is that not what makes a guest comfortable, to have one’s desire for conversation, food, and drink taken care of? In this case, the guest is Jesus Christ who has been invited into the home of Martha and Mary.

It is a great thing to invite the Lord into one’s home. Abraham and Sarah invited into their home three men, interpreted as representing the Trinity in Rublev’s famous icon by that name ([www.sacredheartpullman.org/Icon%20explanation.htm](http://www.sacredheartpullman.org/Icon%20explanation.htm)). The couple’s hospitality was rewarded with the prediction of the birth of a child to a couple that was barren and beyond child bearing age. Not recorded in today’s reading is Sarah’s laugh as she overheard the prediction of their impending pregnancy. Abraham and Sarah had given up hope of having children, but with God all things are possible, and Isaac was born to them.

It is a wonderful thing to invite the Lord into our lives, as did Martha and Mary, Abraham and Sarah. That invitation changes lives, whether the Lord comes as a guest, in the scriptures, in sacrament, in prayer, or in one another. It is especially true in marriage, which is sacred. As one of the seven sacraments – it is a privileged way by which Christ enters our lives. The union of a baptized husband and wife is a sacrament of the union of Christ and His bride, the Church—that is, Christian marriage signifies and really communicates grace--and thus it is entered into with great reverence for both the sacrament and one’s spouse. In fact, the couple is not primarily inviting the Lord into their relationship, but first they are accepting the Lord’s invitation to live their relationship *in Him*. Marriage is a life which

defines the way by which they will walk together towards union with God, the destiny for which each of us was created. The love of God which is made flesh in Christ, now enters into the marriage bond of the Christian couple. In that context, conjugal relations is the sign of the total self-gift of husband to wife and of wife to husband. It is a sign so sacred that it is set aside as proper only to those who are married. Conjugal relations celebrate the joys and sufferings and sacrifices which the spouses have experienced. At the same time, it inspires more of married life looking forward to even greater joys, sufferings, and sacrifices. The marital embrace is a sign of complete acceptance of one's spouse as he or she is. This is one area where our current American culture parts ways with God's vision of marriage, because to alter a significant dimension of oneself in order to enter into this love embrace is a contradiction – it violates the integrity and meaning of the act itself.

For much of the American culture, the marital or conjugal act is viewed more as recreation most of the time, except those occasions when a couple may try to actually have a child. In fact, it is no longer seen as something specifically “marital” or “conjugal” at all! And, we've experienced how destructive this can be, especially for our young people and children. Secular society views it, ideally, as something done by disease-free, consenting adults, with marriage as an optional and incidental precondition and conception as a rare and preventable consequence. Most of the time, one partner or the other will alter himself or herself by eliminating the possibility of conception from the marital act through the use of drugs or devices: a pill, an implant, a condom, an IUD, sterilization, or some other contraceptive by which one's fertility is compromised or eliminated. But this is a contradiction to the essential message of the conjugal act – the conjugal act says, “I love you totally as you are,” while a contraceptive act says, “EXCEPT for your fertility.” How important a part of you is your fertility? Incredibly important! Contraception and sterilization are wrong precisely because they compromise the essential sign of love in marriage, and instead of saying, “I love you totally as you are,” it says, “Alter an essential part of yourself and I will love you.” It looks more like love with reservations than the unconditional love that the marriage bond requires.

So, what if a couple decides, for some serious reason, not to have a(nother) child? Are they just supposed to abstain from love making? This is where the methods of Natural Family Planning (or NFP) enter. Though it is much more, NFP can serve as an effective, scientific, natural, and moral way of avoiding pregnancy without either husband or wife having to alter him/herself, to risk side effects of contraceptives, or to compromise one's integrity or the marriage commitment itself (that is, the marital covenant). The integrity of each person and of the marriage are respected, not altered; thus the essential message of the act (I love you totally as you are) remains intact.

When using NFP, married couples choose to respect the natural rhythms of the wife's fertile and infertile times of her menstrual cycle. They do this in order to attempt to conceive or not. These times can be reliably and easily observed. If they desire the gift of a[nother] child, they can decide to make love during the wife's fertile time; if for some serious reason, they deem it necessary to postpone attempting to conceive, then they refrain from love making during the fertile times. It is a mutual decision about a serious matter – bringing new human life into existence with God's help. With NFP, there is some creativity, discipline and sacrifice involved, but it is worth the effort. No negative side effects accompany NFP use. And, living the NFP lifestyle can help couples to grow in their respect for God's design for married love. Through the practice of NFP, a husband and wife can deepen their respect for

each other as spouses and for themselves as individuals. The NFP lifestyle also builds respect for the marriage bond, and especially the integrity of the unity of the couple. Practicing NFP can enable husband and wife to become more conscious of God's role in building their family. Their faith, as a married couple, will grow and they will realize and live more and more the "one flesh union" that God has willed for them.

Unfortunately, today our culture is opposed to this harmonious vision, largely due to great confusion over the meaning of our bodies, love, life, and marriage. (This confusion is inseparable from the efforts to remove God from our lives or make him secondary.) Our culture says, "Change your bodies so that you can have sexual pleasure whenever you want." In order to do this, we are told to use some barrier; take a drug (despite many risky side effects); alter your-self and alter the marital act. This is promoted so that you can temporarily enjoy one another, or the part of each other that you want to enjoy. Contraceptive actions put the emphasis on a "partial embrace," not a "total embrace." Contraceptives point to a relationship which is characterized more by "manipulation of self" and of the other person, rather than honoring or respecting oneself and the other person. And, in the end, contraceptive behavior runs the risk of reducing one's trust in God and hinders us from loving and being loved completely. There really is a fundamental difference between contraception and NFP!

In the practice of NFP, husband and wife move their relationship into the context of God's love – manipulation is no longer an option; it is no longer OK to use another human person or allow oneself to be used for the sake of pleasure, or convenience, or power or any other motive (in fact, a person may never be used, only things are used!). "Respect" should live in marriage. The marital relationship should be framed by a commitment to give oneself in other-centered love. That is why the love is called "conjugal love," it is total, freely chosen, fruitful, and permanent. Such love mirrors the love of Christ for us and draws the couple into the life and love of the Trinity.

Could Martha and Mary or Abraham and Sarah have possibly known what they were doing when they invited the Lord into their lives? Could they have had any idea of the profound and beautiful consequences of this simple act of hospitality? Today, can the man and woman who undertake marriage in the Catholic Church possibly understand how transformative God's love is? Can they understand how the love of God enters into their lives in the words of the second reading, as part of "the mystery hidden ... from generations past?" Indeed, this is Grace. Husband and wife are eligible to become part of the holy ones who are being perfected in Christ. It is the fulfillment of the deepest spousal joy: to walk together towards union with their loving God.

## DAILY READINGS

### Monday 22 July 2013

Weekday, white (Saint Mary Magdalene, Memorial)

Reading: Exodus 14:5-18

*They will know that I am God when I glorify myself at the expense of Pharaoh.*

Responsorial Psalm: Exodus 15: 1-2,3-4,5-6

*Let us sing to the Lord; he has covered himself in glory.*

Gospel: J 20:1-2, 11-18

*Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?*

Today's readings deal with difficult or impossible situations. Pharaoh's army is chasing the fleeing Israelites. It will take a miracle to escape from Pharaoh's clutches, but Moses and his people remain faithful to God's direction – albeit with some griping – and lo and behold, in tomorrow's first reading the miracle at the Red Sea happens, freeing the Israelites from the Egyptians who drown. Mary Magdalene comes in search of the body of Jesus. It is gone, but driven by her profound love of Jesus, she keeps searching – until the Lord finds her.

What about us? Today the people of the Catholic Church look for a way to live pro-life values in the midst of the Culture of Death in America, where the “law of the land” makes the Church's teachings on marriage and life issues harder and harder to understand and follow – divorce is easily obtained, we (especially the young) are pressured to use contraception as part of the expectation that we will be sexually active without contracting a disease or becoming pregnant, abortion is funded and easily available, and marriage is being redefined. But we continue to fight the good fight, hoping for a miracle but knowing that we must be faithful to the Lord's design for us whether the miracle comes or not. We stand for the dignity of the human person created by God and infused with God's image. It is that image that Jesus recognized and awakened in Mary Magdalene by the way He treated her, and we see the loyalty and love she manifested in response, even after Jesus had died.

During this National Natural Family Planning Awareness Week, we are mindful of how NFP allows couples to follow the Church's teaching about how to treat one another – respecting human dignity and freedom, and showing the discipline required living the married life successfully. In addition, NFP is authentic family planning in that it can be used to both attempt a pregnancy as well as postpone one for serious reasons. With regard to avoiding a pregnancy, when used correctly, NFP can be as effective as other methods—but without disrespecting God's design for married love, without compromising one's integrity, without the financial cost, and without the negative side effects and complications of contraceptives.

So, we continue to fight the good fight of living our Christian values in an increasingly hostile society. We know the secret to living marriage successfully and living peacefully among one another lies in our own conversion, in recognizing God's

image in one another and respecting and embracing it. In marriage, above all, this is important, because this is where children are taught and learn how to relate to others by recognizing the importance of conversion and forgiveness and seeing in others the image of God and our common human destiny of ultimately being in union with God forever.

## Tuesday 23 July 2013

Weekday, green/white (Saint Bridget, Religious)

First Reading: Exodus 14:21—15:1

*The sons of Israel went on dry ground right into the sea.*

Responsorial Psalm: Exodus 15:8-9, 10 & 12, 17

*Let us sing to the Lord; he has covered himself in glory.*

Gospel: Matthew 12:46-50

*Here are my mother and my brothers.*

In the Our Father we always say, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done.” This petition recognizes that our ultimate happiness comes not from getting our own way, but from following God’s way; not from tending to self interest, but from looking out for our neighbor’s best interest. In Luke’s version of this gospel story (Luke 8:19-21), kinship belongs to those who “hear the word of God and act upon it.” Listening to the word and acting on it characterizes those who are mother and brother and sister to Jesus.

Once again, NFP promotes listening between the spouses by expecting them to communicate not only about the fertile times of the wife’s menstrual cycle, but also the desire of each spouse to have a[nother] child. The husband needs to pay attention not only to the physical state of his wife, but also to her deeper desires, as the wife needs to listen to her husband’s desires. It is a conversation about the most serious of topics, bringing new human life into the world.

The Church has always taught that a couple should be open to God’s desires for their family. For some couples, that may mean that they attempt to have as many children as they physically, financially, psychologically, and spiritually can have. This will vary from couple to couple but openness is the key. The Church teaches that it is the mission of the couple to make that serious yet wonderful decision with all care and a properly formed conscience. In order to make good decisions, the couple needs to listen together to the Word of God, to the teachings of the Church, as well as to their own hearts before the Lord. Then they become “mother and sister and brother” to Jesus, and hopefully can pass on this habit of listening to their children. Their children will, in turn, benefit from the harmony brought about by having two parents who are united in listening to God’s voice and acting on it. Whether the couple decides to have a[nother] child or not, NFP helps them to achieve their goal. This gives them a way to effectively and morally conceive, or not, in a mutually respectful and responsible manner.

## Wednesday 24 July 2013

Weekday, green/white (Saint Sharbel Makhlūf, Priest)

First Reading: Exodus 16:1-5, 9-15

*I am the bread for you that comes down from heaven.*

Responsorial Psalm: 78:18-19, 23-24, 25-26, 27-28

*The Lord gave them bread from heaven.*

Gospel: Matthew 13:1-9

*He increased the harvest a hundredfold.*

The theme today is CONTROL. Who is in charge, God or people? The alternative of control is TRUST. The people in the desert want to be in control of their own destiny, while they have been called into the desert to be taught to trust in God. When they trust in God, the Red Sea parts for them, manna is given them, God provides for them. When they go off on their own, things don't work so well. There is a tension here, and it is going to take a while to learn to trust – 40 years of trials and sufferings and miracles. How much for us?

This human obsession with control can be readily seen in the area of family planning. American culture (especially as seen in the perspectives of health care professionals, media personalities, and even political leaders) encourages people to control reproductive processes by technological, chemical and medical means. These means, contraceptives and sterilization, do more than attempt to control human fertility. They disrespect God's design for married love. They alter the way people relate to one another. When one tells someone to alter his/her basic biology, one is being more manipulative than respectful. How does that play out in other aspects of the couple's relationship?

On the other side of the spectrum, the only authentic family planning methods are the natural ones (or Natural Family Planning, NFP). These methods can be used to attempt a pregnancy or postpone one. NFP methods are not merely authentic because they make use of fertility education and are natural, but also, and more importantly as the U.S. Bishops point out, "NFP respects the God-given power to love a new human life into being even when we are not actively seeking to exercise that power." (*Married Love and the Gift of Life*, 2006, p. 13)

NFP allows a husband and a wife to make a decision about their reproductive future in a way which does not alter their biology, but respects it. It calls the couple to be more responsible, not more manipulative—to look at the wellbeing of the other person and the marriage and not just one's own desires. NFP calls for husband and wife to trust in God and respect the natural functioning of their bodies, rather than induce temporary or permanent sterility or resort to abortion in order to avoid pregnancy. And NFP allows one to conceive more effectively, if that is what is desired.

There is great freedom for those who learn to walk by faith and not by sight. The freedom comes from being able to live a lifestyle which respects the image of God in oneself

and one's family and neighbors, as well as trusting that God has a plan, even when one doesn't fully understand it. That plan involves loving/respecting God and neighbor faithfully, and it may or may not involve a huge income, expensive home, multiple cars, remarkable career, etc. As the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council taught in *Gaudium et Spes* (no.35), that which has the greatest value is not **how much** one has, but **who** one is. Who is wealthier, the person with a million dollar home, or a person with several children and a home one-tenth of the cost? What joy there should be to look one's son or daughter in the eye and tell him/her, "I preferred to bring you and your siblings into the world rather than to be wealthier." Who is 'richer' from the Christian perspective?

American culture is not couching the question in those terms, but it is definitely voting for the smaller family, the bigger house, for material well being over the riches of multiple children. If any culture can materially afford big families, it is ours, though we do not see it. Even from an economic point of view, the United States is powerful not because of its standard of living or its natural resources, but because of its greatest resource: people. Many of our problems would be alleviated if the 50+ million people who were aborted were alive today, paying taxes, sharing the social security burden, and allowing our economy to grow. The medieval theologians and philosophers, in talking about God, say: Goodness diffuses itself, it wants to be shared by many. If our culture is so good, why don't we want to have more children, so that we can share it with them?

The culture is fast becoming rocky ground where the seed of the Gospel will not prosper. What measures are we taking so as NOT to become like that? NFP offers us a way out of the Culture of Death and into a Culture that celebrates Life.

### Thursday 25 July 2013

Weekday, red; Forty-Fifth Anniversary of *Humanae vitae* (Saint James, Apostle, feast)

First Reading: 2 Corinthians 4:7-15

*We carry always in our bodies the death of Jesus.*

Responsorial Psalm: 126: 1-2ab, 2cd-3, 4-5, 6

*Those who sow in tears, shall reap with shouts of joy.*

Gospel: Matthew 20:20-28

*You shall indeed drink my cup.*

Seeking privileged places is natural for humans, and especially parents are ambitious for their children to achieve greatness. More fundamentally however, people are happiest when they can: 1) connect with others; 2) become part of something greater; 3) give of ourselves to that something greater; and 4) be fruitful. The mother of James and John is ambitious for her children's future status in the Kingdom of God. But, in the gospel Jesus points to the real basis of happiness – the sacrifice implied by "drinking the cup" and above all the service of others.

All of us need to find a cause, something to love and serve with our lives, to give purpose to our lives. As the saying, goes, "What one lives for, one should be willing to die for." Marriage is one of the ways that a person can find such purpose. It is here that a man or

a woman can: connect with one's spouse; become part of a family (something greater); give time, energy, money, care and concern—one's total self—to God through one's family. And, husband and wife are fortunate if blessed with children as the fruit of their spousal union. This is something to live for and something to die for, something which can give meaning to one's life. It is certainly part of the reason why marriage is such a lasting and beautiful institution. When done right, the marriage of one man to one woman benefits the spouses, their children, the extended family, community, and nation—all benefit and find great happiness.

That happiness can be compromised by acting selfishly, by allowing willfulness to dominate a marriage relationship. A friend of mine in religious life likes to speak of "Little Will" who comes with us when we join a religious community. "Little Will" is that natural willfulness which causes us to be self-centered rather than other-centered. A large part of the battle for holiness involves conquering "Little Will," our desire to get our own way. This is true in both marriage and in religious life. That is why Jesus emphasizes that greatness is measured by service, not by how one lords it over others; by sacrificial love, not by exercising authority over others.

As a tool that can help discipline "Little Will," the methods of Natural Family Planning recognize a greater goal than one's own will. NFP subjects the will of the spouses to the greater good of the marriage and ultimately to God's will, and expects that the spouses create a culture of respect, requiring at times restraint in how they deal with one another. It is part of learning to conquer "Little Will," to look not to self-interest but what's best for the marriage, on the way to learning how to serve one's family rather than lord it over them. This path ends in holiness.

### **Friday 26 July 2013**

Weekday, white (Saints Joachim and Anne, Parents of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Memorial)

First Reading: Exodus 20:1-17

*The law was given through Moses.*

Responsorial Psalm: 19:7, 8, 9, 10

*Lord, you have the words of everlasting life.*

Gospel: Matthew 13:18-23

*He who hears the word of God and understands it, yields much fruit.*

In the first reading, the Ten Commandments are given. They are the Law which expressed the covenant between the Lord and His people. They are also the Law by which many of us learned to examine our conscience before confession. As we think about the Ten Commandments, what we may forget is that these divinely given laws are about relationship (they are not merely about following rules!). The Ten Commandments help us understand how to act lovingly toward God and toward our neighbors.

When it comes to marriage, the Ten Commandments talk about not committing adultery (#6) and tell us about the importance of not "coveting" one's neighbor's spouse (#9). They also speak about how children should "honor" their parents (#4). In addition to the Ten

Commandments, God's law regarding married love is found throughout Sacred Scripture, especially in the Genesis accounts which speak of men and women created in equal dignity as images of God (Gen. 1:27), where the woman is a "suitable partner" for the man (Gen. 2:18) and where both are entrusted with the sacred duty to procreate (Gen. 1:28). Since God's design for married love is for the union of the couple and the procreation of children, human fertility is also caught up in the Divine laws. All established for our good!

Of course, and as the U.S. bishops wrote, this does not mean that God insists that every married couple leaves their family size "entirely to chance" (see *Married Love and the Gift of Life*, 2006, p. 9). It does however, mean, that husband and wife must seek to respect God's design. They must not do anything "to suppress or curtail the life-giving power given by God that is an integral part of what they pledged to each other in their marriage vows." (*Married Love and the Gift of Life*, 2006, p. 8).

Today we are fortunate that the methods of Natural Family Planning (NFP) are available. They are the only methods that respect God's design for married love and the gift of life. NFP methods are based on real science, on the physical/biological laws which govern the menstrual cycle of a woman. Knowing and observing these laws gives a couple confidence in how God made them. With NFP information, husband and wife can know when to attempt to have children while, at the same time, respecting their biology and gift of fertility. In other words, the physical laws which God created by which humans reproduce are known and respected. What a privilege to know how the Lord created us, and how we operate! We all need to respect that process, that dignity, by developing self-mastery.

But wait! That is so hard, so restraining, and so incomprehensible to our culture. We want drugs to help us get rid of obesity, to lower our blood pressure, to help us sleep, to enable us to give up smoking. Often, though not always, these are shortcuts which bypass living more healthy lifestyles. We are so used to getting what we want NOW, without counting the cost. So is it any surprise that we would want sex without consequences of children or even a permanent commitment to a relationship? All we have to do is change the rules to what we want them to be. And we are so technologically savvy that we think it's okay to manipulate our own biology to make it the way we want it to be. Unless, of course, we understand that the language of true love is sacrifice and that trust is more important than control.

Today it is important to reflect on the fact that self-mastery is a language of love which must not be confused with lust or desire or duplicity or deceit. How would it be to have a relationship marked by confident assurance in the integrity of one's spouse who not only says "I love you" in words but backs it up with deeds? Is it worth the cost of learning self-mastery?

Do we recognize a higher power, or do we have to be in control ourselves? Is life about living for ourselves, or about living to serve others within the freedom of respecting the natural moral law and living in God's grace?

## Saturday 27 July 2013

Weekday, green/white (Blessed Virgin Mary)

First Reading: Exodus 24:3-8

*This is the blood of the covenant which the Lord God has made with you.*

Responsorial Psalm: 50:1-2, 5-6, 14-15

*Offer to God a sacrifice of praise.*

Gospel: Matthew 13:24-30

*Let them both grow until the harvest time.*

In the first reading, the Covenant is read to the people. They agree, and Moses seals it with the blood of oxen sprinkled on the people and on the altar, ratifying the covenant. In the Old Testament, where there is blood, they mean business.

For Catholics, the marital embrace is an essential sign of the consummation of the sacrament of marriage. The bond of marriage should be entered into freely with the man and the woman intending fidelity and permanence in their relationship as well as being open to life. Being open to having children doesn't mean that couples are expected to have as many children as they can possibly conceive. At the same time, it also doesn't mean following the dictates of society where only two or even one child have become the norm. Openness to life means that husband and wife should prayerfully discern what God's will is for their married lives, understand their just reasons for their family size, and do nothing to oppose God's plan for married love.

In our Catholic faith, marital intercourse celebrates the sacrifices which both husband and wife continually make while at the same time, inspiring them to even greater sacrifices in the future as a pledge of their love. In the ideal, any hint of using one's spouse for selfish pleasure, or of using sex to get something from each other, compromises the sign. Does it happen? Yes, it does. Is it right? No—we are called to do more than use one another. We are called to self-sacrificial love, and intercourse is meant to celebrate that love. It also is meant to bear fruit accordingly by producing more self-sacrificial love and children, besides. This is what the Church means when we say that conjugal love is generous—it is other-directed.

NFP provides a way of guarding against the danger of selfishness. NFP helps to preserve the integrity of the marital act as the most profound sign of the true love of husband and wife. Are we not in danger of losing our appreciation of that sign, as our culture compromises the structure of the sign of marriage, as pornography and promiscuity (the rotten fruits of the sexual revolution) become more common, as our culture attempts to change even the definition of marriage? We are called to a greater freedom, to live the marriage vows according to the Biblical and Catholic vision—according to the truth and beauty of God's plan—not according to the shifting sands of the culture.

In the Gospel, a man sowed good seed, then an enemy sowed weeds with it. They are separated at the harvest. In the 1960s, the sexual revolution and the Gospel were promoted

under the same title: love. Phrases like “make love, not war” and “free love” were common slogans in the sixties. Of course, Jesus says, “Love one another, as I have loved you.”

It turns out that the two seeds were quite different, as can be seen from the distance of almost fifty years. The divorce rate has increased and children are reared less and less by both biological parents in American society as more people turn to abortion and contraception to control their reproductive lives. People even call NFP “Catholic contraception,” which only points to a misunderstanding of NFP. This is another case of sowing wheat (NFP) and weeds (contraception) together. In fact, there is strong anecdotal evidence that couples who use NFP have an incredibly lower divorce rate than other couples in America. It is not NFP alone that contributes to this. It is that couples who practice NFP tend to invite God into their marital relationship. Contraceptive practice, on the other hand, is inherently manipulative of one’s biology and one’s gift of fertility. NFP is inherently respectful not only of biology, but also of husband, wife and the potential gift of a child who may come from their union. NFP respects what contraception rejects: the sanctity of marriage.

Eventually, how we treat one another bears fruit. It is harvest time, and it is about time we learned from our mistakes and moved away from the Culture of Death and build a Culture of Life based on the Catholic vision of marriage—which is God’s vision. How are you who are married or preparing for marriage going to protect yourselves from the consequences of the sexual revolution, the Culture of Death? What vision of sexuality and marriage are you going to pass on to your children? Wheat or weeds – what is it going to be?