

*By Marilyn Sharpe*

No, this is not a column about New Year's resolutions. God offers us a "fresh start" every single day! What does that mean to you as a parent or to your child or to your family? It means that every day you begin with a fresh slate, not by any effort or achievement on your part, but because God shows love for you by offering you a new beginning each and every day.

Alex, not quite five years old, cowered, head bowed, behind the couch. Tears streamed down his cheeks. Dan, his beloved dad, had just corrected him for pulling a toy out of his sister's hands. Dan's voice was firm and kind and loving to both his children, but Alex read his father's correction as disapproval of him. Dan knelt next to Alex, wrapped him in his arms, and said, "I love you, son. Part of loving you is to help you become your best self. No matter what you do, I never stop loving you." Alex melted into his dad's embrace, wiped his tears, took a deep breath, and went back to play.

Dan taught Alex and Emma to name and own their mistakes. He taught them how to say, "I'm sorry. Will you forgive me?" (This is not to be confused with the cheesy, whiney, apology-on-demand, that sounds like "Saaaarreee," the less-than-heartfelt apology that makes a mockery of confession and absolution.) This one comes from the heart, when the child is ready. He also taught them to forgive, with grace, not dismissing the wrong with a breezy, "Oh, no problem" or "No big deal." This is the look-you-in-the-eye and say, "I forgive you." He has taught them that forgiveness frees them both to begin again.

And Dan has taught them that forgiveness is a gift from God, promised at their baptism. Each night when they say their prayers, they remember to ask God's forgiveness, too. And they are reminded that God forgives them and wants them to forgive one another. Dan has prepared them to pray the Lord's Prayer: Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. What a lesson for life!

But I didn't learn this when I was young. As a child, I tried so hard to be perfect ... without any spectacular success. When I made a mistake or wronged someone, instead of saying, "I am so sorry. Can you forgive me?" I tried to hide it or blame someone else. I walked around with a load of guilt, afraid that if anyone knew what I was really like, no one could love me.

Then, I had children! Alison wasn't even two years old. One night during his residency, Les was on duty at the hospital. Alison simply would not go to bed, nor would she stay in her room. I'd had it. I snapped. Holding onto her doorknob, I yelled at this precious child. "GO TO SLEEP!" (Can you believe that it didn't work?) She held onto the doorknob on her side of the door, and yelled back. At that moment, I felt like I watched this from the ceiling. I wanted to ask, "Will the real adult in this apartment stand up, please?" But there wasn't one. I opened the door, dropped to my knees, enfolded her in my arms, and said, "Alison, I am so sorry. I was frustrated and tired and you didn't deserve that. I love you. Can you forgive me?" And she did. Then, I knew the grace of God.

Forgiveness, both giving and receiving, is a gift of God, offered to you and your children every day of this new year. Won't you receive it and pass it on?

#### FAMILY ACTIVITIES

1. As a parent, model apologizing, asking for forgiveness, and forgiving others.
2. Include confession in prayers with your children.
3. When you are reading a story or watching a movie and see an example of others needing to ask for or offer forgiveness, ask your child how the character might handle it.
4. When your child needs to apologize, talk to them about it in private, offering to practice it with them.
5. Catch your child asking for or offering forgiveness and tell them how proud you are of them!