Family disputes. How might we deal with family disputes especially in this Year of Mercy?

Two examples of family disputes. Some year ago many hundreds of miles from here, I celebrated a funeral Mass for a family engaged in an inheritance dispute. The dispute focused not on millions of dollars, or extensive real estate properties, but on a single piece of furniture. The dispute centered on “who got what.” While the deceased mother lay in the casket in the center aisle, two siblings with spouses sat in the front pew on one side of the church, another two siblings with spouses sat in the first pew on the opposite side of the church, and one final sibling sat with his wife in the very last pew of the church. The family had gone into deep rift over which adult child would receive this single piece of furniture, which had neither monetary nor sentimental value. It I were to describe for you this piece of furniture, the whole congregation would emit a collective groan. How sad that a family would break up over any issue, and this issue … what a tragedy.

When I was a boy in elementary school, my mom and dad borrowed $5 from an unmarried aunt. In the O’Malley family situation, my mom and dad did not have the means to repay that loan. The aunt, who lived in the same small town as we did, and went to the same Sunday morning Mass as we did in my small hometown, did not talk to us for years. Imagine all that hurt and wasted time and anger over $5!

In today’s gospel, we hear the marvelous story of the Prodigal Son. The younger son requested to receive his inheritance before his father died, which effectively communicated that the son wished that his father were already dead. The father acceded to the request. The younger son then wasted his inheritance on wine, women and song. Eventually, the son returned. Feeling chastened and sorrowful, he says, “Father, I have sinned against God and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son. Treat me as you would one of your hired workers.” The father responded by hosting a feast. The older son learned of this and resented the father’s rejoicing. The older son says, “all these years, I have served you, and not once did I disobey your orders. Yet you never even gave me a young goat to feast on with my friends,” but when your other son returns, “for him you slaughter the fattened calf.”
Notice how the father acts in this family dispute. He takes the high road. He enjoys a perspective that is long-term and broad-minded. The father observes that this younger son, "had been dead, and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found." The father extends mercy. Mercy is not served by caving in, not by not holding people accountable, not by not applying standards. Divine mercy, however, is defined as "God’s eternally enduring loving kindness." Divine mercy transcends our human standards. The Jewish word for mercy is hesed. I describe God’s mercy, hesed, as a loving embrace, a hug, that is welcoming, holding, healing, forgiving. This embrace communicates without words, “I love you. You are very dear to me.” God’s mercy transcends the particular the particulars of people’s behaviors. God’s mercy is eternally, enduing, loving kindness.

In this year of mercy, how might you respond to the inevitable disputes in your families? ... May I suggest that you might act simply like the father of the Prodigal Son. Take a long-term, broad-minded view. Yes, we hold people accountable. Yes, we have our standards. But mercy transcends human standards. Mercy is our way of sharing in and sharing with others, God’s Spirit.