

Make room for the essential

The other day we were sitting in a restaurant waiting for our food to arrive, and the children were getting a little antsy. I pulled a pack of cards out of my purse and handed it over to one of our boys, who immediately started shuffling and dealing the cards for a game.

Our waiter, stopping by to check on us, seemed slightly taken aback by the intense card game that had erupted in the midst of our plates and glasses. But we always have cards on hand because I carry a deck in my purse. Of course I do. I also always have Band-Aids, disinfectant wipes, an assortment of pens, a notepad, a phone charger or two, a digital camera just in case my phone fails me, a St. Christopher medal, and a variety of other items.

Sometimes I have an umbrella or a book tucked inside. Sometimes I even have a can of soup, just in case. Many days I reach in to discover sunglasses, ties, small toys, and wads of trash my children have dropped into my bag.

“You shouldn’t junk up your purse,” one of my boys told me the other day.

“Well ... we probably shouldn’t junk it up either,” his brother told him.

Children can be so wise.

A well-stocked purse is key to my parenting strategy. When one of my son’s teammates is injured on the Little League field, I have a Band-Aid ready to offer. When we’re running errands and my husband needs a tissue, he knows to check with me.

But there are always items in the bag that are extraneous. And I never want to acknowledge that the purse is getting out of control until I realize the straps are fraying because no purse can hold everything I expect mine to carry.

That’s when I sit down and start pulling out what’s inside. I’m always surprised by how many pens and ponytail holders I find mixed up with the spare change that has dropped to the dark recesses of the purse. There is almost always a crushed package

of stale oyster crackers whose origin I can't recall. And who knows where the cherry Starbursts and mini-Reese's peanut butter cups come from?

Cleaning out my purse is always an exercise in humility, especially as I realize my bag is overflowing not just with necessary items, but also mounds of clutter.

When I think about it, my purse is a bit like my life - full and messy. Some of what I'm squeezing in is worth fitting in. But some of what I'm adding to the load just gets in the way of the rest that I do need. Someone else - or no one - could carry those things, and the world would still turn.

We all take on burdens we could decide to set down. Like a mother who lets her children cram their trash into her purse, we say yes to things that we could - and probably should - just say no to. Maybe by saying no to those extraneous tasks, we could have room in our lives to say yes to what really matters - to God and his plan for our lives.

"Throw off the heavy load of your own will, cast aside the burden of sin, and gird yourselves as valiant warriors," said St. Francis of Assisi. "Forget what you are leaving behind; strain forward to the great things before you."

As we begin the start of a new school year, and children and young people are filling their backpacks for a season of new opportunities, maybe we, too, can take the time to look at what's filling our lives. Perhaps this is a chance to set aside some of what we have been carrying and say yes to God in a new - or renewed - way.