

HOMILY -FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY “B” 12/31/17

Every year, the Sunday after Christmas is called Holy Family Sunday. In many ways, by this time we might be overdosing on family. After all the parties, the family meals, the travel, the cooking, the obligations and expectations, some of us may have had about as much “family” as we can take. This feast challenges us to look at what it means to be family.

During this Christmas season it is easy to sentimentalize the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. After all, we can forget that the Holy Family was flesh and blood. They were not that different from us. They were holy, yes. But they were also human.

The story of the Holy Family did not always turn out as we expected. It’s a story of a teenage mother, conceiving a child before she was married. It’s the story of an anxious father, confronting scandal, planning on divorce. It’s the story of a family forced to become refugees, living in the land that once held their ancestors as slaves. It is also the story of a missing child and days of anxious searching by his parents.

But there is even more. As a young man, Jesus faced a violent death – one his mother watched with helplessness and almost unimaginable sorrow. The family was holy. But it was also human. We need these reminders. Especially now!

The Church’s liturgical calendar shows us that the Christmas season is one of light – but also of shadow. The day after Christmas we celebrated the feast of the first martyr, Saint Stephen. Then a couple days later, we marked the feast of the Holy Innocents, the children slaughtered by Herod. The joy of Christ’s birth is suddenly tempered by tragic reminders of what the Incarnation cost. And the Holy Family shared in that.

While we focused on the beautiful nativity scene arranged in front of our baptismal pool, over the altar hangs a large cross of the crucified Christ. The juxtaposition of these two images in our church, the crèche and the crucifix, serves as a powerful lesson for this feast. We realize that when we speak of the Holy Family, we speak of a family that struggled and suffered, like so many of us.

But this family also knew profound hope. They trusted completely in God. They call us to that kind of trust. And they are with us. In our own time, they stand beside all who worry, who struggle, who search, who pray.

The Holy family stands beside parents anxious about their children, worried for their well being. They walk with immigrants and refugees separated from those they love. They comfort teen age mothers and single parents. They console the prisoner, the outcast, the bullied, the scorned – and the parents who love them. And they offer solace and compassion to any mother or father grieving over the loss of a child.

The Holy Family shares our burdens. But they also uplift us by their example. Jesus, Mary and Joseph were never alone. They endured through the grace of God. They prayed. They hoped, they trusted in God's will.

We might ask ourselves where we can find that kind of peace and purpose in our own families, in our own lives. In Paul's beautiful letter to the Corinthians, he tells us to put on compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, patience, forgiveness and love. It is all that simple – and all that difficult. I am sure the Holy Family had moments when living these virtues seemed hard, or even impossible. They gave themselves fully to God.

When we find ourselves overwhelmed, we need to remember where we look today and remember to look toward the nativity scene. There is our model for living: Jesus, Mary and Joseph. But we need to see them in full, remembering the closeness of the cross. That was their life and it's ours too. Yet, through all their hardships, in a time of anxiety and difficulty, persecution and tragedy, a time very much like our own, they showed us how to be people of faith, people of forgiveness, people of love.

Closing Story 12-31-17

There was a minister who was preoccupied, like many ministers, with thoughts of how he was going to ask his congregation to come up with more money that they needed for repairs on the church building. Therefore he was really annoyed to find out that the regular organist was sick and a substitute had to be brought in at the last minute. The substitute wanted to know what music was to be played and the pastor very impatiently gave her a copy and said, "Here is a copy of the service, but you have to think of something to play after I make the announcement about the finances." Well, during the service the minister paused and looked at the people and said, "Brothers and sisters we are in great difficulty: the roof repairs cost twice as much as we expected and we need four thousand dollars more. Any of you who can pledge one hundred dollars or more would you please stand." At that moment the substitute organist played the National Anthem. Needless to say she became the full time organist.