

ALL IN THE FAMILY



This Sunday we hear the parable of the Prodigal Son. Despite the myriad of social opprobrium that unfolds in this story, most of it behavior dishonorable to society's norms for a family, in the end the son returns to his father; his father welcomes back his son. The older son, while peeved, remains with his father. The family appears to be whole again.

My parents divorced while I was in the sixth grade. They fought long before their day of separation. I grew up without a healthy model of "family" and assumed that the perfect family was what I watched on television: *The Waltons*, *Happy Days*, *The Brady Bunch*, *The Dick Van Dyke Show*.

Fifty percent of all marriages end in divorce. Fifty percent of all second marriages end in divorce and when stepchildren are involved the failure rate of second marriages jumps to 75%. Therefore we can assume that half of us do not have a healthy example of a family that we can use as a guide for the family that we create as adults.

Across from our realities stands the Catholic social teaching that the basic unit of society is the family, not the individual. Pope Benedict wrote, "The family, the first cell of human society, remains the primary training ground for harmonious relations at every level of coexistence, human, national and international." *Religious Freedom, the Path to Peace (2011 World Day of Peace)*. Unlike the unrealistic portrayals I watched on television, however, this Catholic social teaching serves as our highest ideal, the aspirational goal.

Is the family that appears to be healthy and whole but hiding underneath is an infestation of egos and temptations and lack of relationship skills, is that truly a family? Legally, yes, but Jesus stressed that appearances mattered less than truth.

Families may suffer from many infestations. Today's first and second readings give us insight to three: temptation, blasphemy and arrogance. The people of Moses had become depraved by making for themselves a molten calf and worshiping it. At the expense of our marriage and family, how many of us have succumbed to the addiction of alcohol, television, work, material goods, or volunteering?

How often have we disrespected God (blasphemy) by not placing God in the center of our family but off to the side, brought out for Sunday mass and evening grace and one afternoon a week at the food pantry?

When our seven-year old son or seventeen-year old daughter is right, can we admit it and apologize? Can our partner be right? Can our partner be wrong and yet we forgive or forget? Can it not matter if our partner is right or wrong or whether there's a good reason to prefer one candidate over another? As a kid I once heard these words that I've never forgotten, "you can be right or you can be happy; rarely can you be both." The disease of arrogance and egotism.

Our Catholic faith teaches us that there are always second chances and forgiveness. Jesus tells us that "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance." (Not for a second do I intend to be judgmental and imply that a failing marriage is sinful.) That is the hope and the promise that Jesus delivered. No matter how messed up your family may be, you can still turn away from temptations, secular-focused lives, and pride and turn toward the father (or mother, spouse or child) apologize and make amends.

That is the goal we aspire to. Living is not easy; we humans make mistakes over and over again. Life (and families) can be more meaningful through overcoming personal struggle. What can be better than new love? Old love that has weathered life's trials. I imagine there would be great joy in heaven.

(Readings for 24th Sunday of Ordinary Time)



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