

Holy Family 2019

Sir 3:2-6, 12-14; Col 3:12-217 (short); MT 2:13-15,19-23

In over 15 years of doing counseling I've seen a lot of families. There is one thing that has always struck me - it is the seemingly magnetic bond that exists in families. Even if they are fighting, even if there is some estrangement, for most there is a recognition of the other as family, and some sort of indescribable connection is there. We can ignore that connection. It can also be almost totally blocked out by feelings of anger and resentment - and sometimes there are things that have happened that may give us reason to feel that way - but the connection is still there. The power of God to bind families together and to help heal them can be very powerful. Today's feast of the Holy Family gives us a model of family love. It is not always easy to live up to, but it is a model that has at its base the relationships of the persons of the Trinity, a unity that is hard to match, but a goal to strive towards.

As the basic unit of society, the basic unit of the Church, the place of our earliest formation and education - the family is key to human culture, existence, and right worship of God. In our first reading we heard of God's directives for the life of a family: *God sets a father in honor over his children; a mother's authority he confirms over her sons. Whoever honors his father atones for sins, and ... he stores up riches who reveres his mother.* There is a natural respect for members that God expects (despite difficulties), it is a Divinely ordained pattern of love and connection. This is that echo of deep connection that I have noticed - it seems to happen naturally in families because it is natural - placed in our deepest workings by God. When we act in line with that natural tendency, when we allow the natural affection and bonds come out then there is a certain prosperity that results - as the passage suggests. To act in a way that is disrespectful, unloving, or hostile towards family it goes against something in that God-given nature of ours and strife, regret, and sadness follow.

This ideal can be difficult because family members are sometimes difficult. The people we are closest to can be some of the most difficult people to deal with at times. Also we seem to feel more permission to push them away, trusting that the natural bond will hold that deep something in place. If it stretches too far we lose something of the peace and prosperity we can have, and if it breaks, we are disconnected from something that we are meant to be part of and which is part of us.

Being part of a family requires work and detection. Look at the Gospel and Joseph's faithfulness. He was ready to bail on the family before it really got started, but followed not his own desires to escape discomfort and problems, but the words of God spoken by the Angel. He was told to have no fear and he committed himself fully. He not only became the father of the Holy Family, but also its protector. When his family was threatened he took it far away and returned when it was safe. Mary was a model of faithfulness and love and stayed with her son to the bitter end cradling his lifeless body at the foot of the cross - it would have been easier to not be there, but she was not going to abandon her child. Jesus we are told was obedient to Mary and Joseph. One of his last acts was to be sure his mother would be taken care of after he died. He placed the duty of family above asserting his own power and superiority as the God-Man. Each could have left, each could have taken an easier path, each could have walked away from family duty - but they did not. The result was a family that was strong and something to imitate.

But even more than imitating the Holy Family in our own families, we are called to expand this duty and loyalty to the larger human family as well. When St. Paul is writing to the Colossians in the second reading, he is speaking not to a human family, but to a church family. His words ring true to the sort of way we should act towards our parent, siblings, and other family members: *bearing with one another and forgiving one another ... as the Lord has forgiven you ... And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection.* The more we strive for that perfection in our families of origin, the more we strive for that perfection in our parish family, the more we strive for that perfection in the whole family of humankind - then the more there will be a prosperity and peace like we heard about in the first reading. This model of perfect unity is based on the complete and total unity of the Trinity, so joined in love, so bound together in a perfect oneness that there are no divisions.

We may be too weak as humans to get that tight a unity, we may be too easily hurt and resentful at times to achieve that perfection. But the more we strive to restore whatever is blocking the natural bonds of family unity, the more we can be forgiving and look to others as fellow members of a larger family, the more we will bring the love of God into our lives, our families, and into the world - and that is a wonderful thing to hope for, and a goal that - with God's help - we can get closer to each year.