

FR. MIKE'S MESSAGE FOR HOLY FAMILY SUNDAY

Has your family ever argued over Christmas decorations?

Maybe it's the choice of tree - real or artificial?

Or the lights - multicolored or all white, blinking or not?

Maybe the tinsel - thrown on by the handfuls or each strand hung individually?

What would the holidays be without some disagreement over Christmas decorations?

Well this year, one controversy that caught my attention came from an unexpected place - the Vatican.

Every year, the Vatican invites a town in Italy to provide the manger scene for St. Peter's Square.

This year's invitation was given to the town of Castelli which has been known for centuries for their ceramic sculptures.

SCREEN: Manger scene from Rome

Here's one photo of the manger scene they provided.

The figures were created 50 years ago by students at a local art school.

To say their manger scene created a little controversy would be an understatement.

Now, this photo is one of the more flattering.

It doesn't show some of the other figures, which include an astronaut, and another figure that some say reminds them of Darth Vader.

Onlookers have called the manger scene hideous, horrible, embarrassing, confusing, and upsetting.

And those are the words I can say in church!

But one onlooker had a different take.

She said this:

"I like it because these are not traditional times and we don't need a traditional Nativity scene.

It's disconcerting, but this is a disconcerting year."

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Manger scenes have become works of art, known for their beauty.

The faithful look to them for comfort, for calm and peace.

It might help to know that manger scenes have only been around for 800 years.

St. Francis of Assisi is credited with creating the first one.

He believed that if Christians could connect with the lowliness and poverty of Jesus's birth, they just might be moved to alleviate the poverty of their brothers and sisters.

So in a sense, manger scenes should shock us out of our comfort zone enough to embrace the messiness of life.

And let's be clear; no parent would choose a stable full of animals for their baby's birth.

I can't even begin to imagine the sights, the sounds and smells - not to mention the lack of hygiene.

Not a place where any child should enter the world, let alone the Son of God.

But isn't that precisely the point?

The birth of Christ was messy in so many ways.

From the very moment the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that God had chosen her to be the mother of the messiah, it was one disturbing moment after another.

First, Joseph, her betrothed, upon learning that Mary was expecting decided to divorce her.

Then an angel appeared to assure him that it was by the Holy Spirit that Mary had conceived.

Next, Caesar ordered a census, which required Mary and Joseph to make a difficult journey to Bethlehem, just as the baby was due.

Finding no room in any of the inns, they ended up in the stable.

Soon after Jesus was born, Mary and Joseph took him to the Temple to offer thanks to God.

And as we heard in today's Gospel reading, what should have been a moment of joy turned ominous with Simeon and Anna's prophecies of the hard road ahead for Jesus, Mary and Joseph.

Then the family had to flee to Egypt because King Herod was trying to kill the baby.

Messy, upsetting, disturbing - it was all that and more.

And yet, it was all God's plan.

Why?

God could have chosen any number of ways to save humanity, why this way?

Here's my answer: God came into our world in exactly this way, to send the message that he is with us in the messiness of our lives.

Lives that are not perfect and can be full of upsets, controversies and messiness.

And after the year we've been through,

I think it perfectly describes family life today.

And yet for many families, the challenges they faced caused them to grow closer and to turn to God and others to get through.

God didn't cause the pandemic or any of this year's struggles, but he wants us to never forget this truth:

SCREEN: God loves us, God is in control and God has a plan.

God had a plan for the Holy Family and

God has a plan for you and your family too.

His plan does not guarantee a life free of messy moments.

God doesn't promise that you won't face challenges, pain or sacrifice.

Instead, God says over and over:

I love you, I'm in control, and I have a plan for your life.

So when times get tough, how do you and I make it through?

St. Paul in today's second reading gave us the answer.

He wrote to the Colossians, encouraging them to remain strong in the faith and here is what he said:

SCREEN: Put on, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another,

**if one has a grievance against another;
as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do.
And over all these put on love,
that is, the bond of perfection.**

When times get tough, Paul says, “put on love”.

Now, I know that can sound trite.

It may sound sappy or sentimental - just love!

And you might be thinking,

“Father Mike, you don’t know my family and the year we’ve been through!

We fought over everything,

COVID, masks, social distancing, quarantining,

racial injustice, the election.”

Yeah, I know, my family sounds just like yours.

We argued about all those things too!

Every family can be messy, but that’s always been true.

We didn’t need 2020 to teach us this.

But I’m hoping your family also came together

in ways you hadn’t before - I know mine did.

Maybe got to know each other in new ways,

became a bit more understanding and forgiving.

And anytime you did, you were living out Paul’s teaching.

You:

SCREEN: put on love

The image that these words call to mind for me,

is a coat- *put on love* - it’s like a garment we need to wrap ourselves in.

Something that everyone sees when they look at us.

Paul doesn’t say it will be easy.

So what does this love look like in practice?

Well, in another of St. Paul’s letters, the first one he wrote to the Corinthians,

he was very clear and practical - he gave this beautiful description of

what it looks like when disciples ‘put on love’:

Love is patient, love is kind.

It is not jealous, is not pompous, it is not inflated,

it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests,

it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury,

it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth.

It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never fails.

That's what it looks like to 'put on love'.

And it's really hard work that requires sacrifice and commitment.

And unlike a piece of clothing, love shouldn't be something you take on and off depending on how you feel, depending on who the person is, depending on how badly they hurt you or how upset they made you.

No, followers of Jesus must:

love everyone, always, no exceptions.

Must be willing to put the needs and well being of the other person ahead of your own.

So here are some recommendations for the next year for how to grow in love for the people in your life:

SCREEN: listen more than you speak

I truly believe if we spent more time listening, especially with people we find it difficult to love or agree with, we could learn a lot.

And we could grow in love for them.

So, try listening more than you speak in 2021.

Here's my next recommendation:

SCREEN: talk, don't argue

Now, with some people, it might be wise to limit the amount of time you interact, especially if it's someone who tends to push your buttons.

Not saying cut them off, but maybe not respond to everything they say or post - for your peace of mind as well as theirs.

Next:

SCREEN: forgive

No one is perfect when it comes to love.

We can all lose our cool, and do or say things we regret.

Love is messy.

And when it happens, be willing to forgive the other person.

Be the bigger person by taking the first step to reconcile.

Clean up any mess you make by apologizing and making amends.

And forgive includes being willing to forgive yourself.

And finally, but most importantly:

SCREEN: pray

Prayer is a powerful tool to bring about healing.

Prayer also can soften hearts, change minds, and help us

become more attuned to the mind of God and the heart of Christ.

I will end Mass today offering a prayer of blessing for you and your family.

But I encourage you to pray every day of 2021 for the people in your life -

especially anyone you struggle to love or forgive.

And it can be a very simple prayer, like:

Lord, help me to be more patient with this person.

Lord, help me to love him/her as you do.

Lord, help me to forgive the hurt they caused.

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Today as we honor the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph,

may we grow in faith everyday.

And as children of God, may we truly

‘put on love’ in the new year with all our brothers and sisters. Amen. +