

Holy Family - C
Sirach 3:2-6, 12-14;
Colossians 3:12-17
Luke 2:41-52
Little Flower - 12/29/24

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family. Today's Liturgy invites us to reflect on the meaning of family. Each of today's readings offers us an insight into what it takes to be a healthy family.

The first reading talks about the relationship between fathers and sons. However, the message of the first reading is equally valid about the relationship of all parents and children and of family members among themselves. Sirach uses the words *honor* and *revere*. I would suggest that these are synonyms for respect. Sirach is calling sons to respect their fathers, children to respect their parents, parents to respect their children, and family members to respect each other.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul wrote, "*Love each other as much as brothers and sisters should, and have a profound respect for each other*" [Romans 12:9]. Respect is the necessary precondition for love. To respect someone is to cherish that person's otherness.

Sirach is extremely relevant to our day: "*My son, take care of your father when he is old.... Even if his mind fail, be considerate with him....*" Because we are living longer, we find ourselves taking care of elderly parents. Sirach's message is that family relationships are for life. Miss Manners once wrote a column in which she pointed out that we all have to make certain allowances for family that we would not make for others.¹

One year, at a Canon Law Convention, two speakers argued that when couples marry, they become part of three families: the family from which they came, the family into which they marry, and the family they create themselves. Couples frequently struggle to balance their commitments to the three families. This is never more evident than at Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Today's Gospel tells the story of the finding of the Child Jesus in the temple. If anything, this story powerfully reminds us that there are no perfect families, no perfect parents, and, dare I say, no perfect children. No doubt Joseph and Mary were responsible parents, but they left on their return trip to Nazareth without checking on Jesus' whereabouts. After searching for him for three days, Mary was justifiably upset when she said to Jesus, "*Son, why have you done this to us?*" Jesus' response to Mary was probably not exactly what she wanted and needed to hear, "*Why were you looking for me?*"

As I have said before, families are inherently messy. This story of Jesus and his family ought to free us from the burden of striving to be perfect parents, perfect children, or the perfect family. Today we hear and read so much about functional and dysfunctional families. Some say that every family is dysfunctional because every family has problems. However, what distinguishes a functional from a dysfunctional family is not the presence or absence of family problems, but how those problems are handled—constructively or destructively. Today's second reading from Paul's Letter to the Colossians, a reading often read at weddings, enumerates many of the qualities that contribute to holy, healthy, and happy families.

My brothers and sisters, I spent Christmas Day with my brother and his wife and their family. My older niece has two very young children. Just spending six hours with them I saw how much time, energy, and effort it takes to take care of very young children. I really think that those of us who do not have children have no idea what it is like to raise holy, healthy, and happy children. For example, they were planning a two-night trip to Chicago to see my nephew and his family. I could not believe everything they had to take with them. Today, then, I would like to suggest that we all be more supportive of families within our extended family who have children at home, especially young children. Likewise, I would like to suggest that we all be more supportive of families within the various communities of which we are part that do not have the support of extended family living near them.

¹ Judith Martin, *Which Turkeys to Stuff?* washingtonpost.com, (Sunday, November 16, 2003; Page D02).