

Feast of the Holy Family 2014

A few years ago a priest began the homily by saying that he and his staff have studied the families of the parish and he was going to give a trophy to the family who best resembled the Holy Family. When he made the announcement, the church went deeply silent.

The priest said that his people think that “being like the Holy Family” meant “being perfect”. You know, like

- No negative feelings**
- No hurtful words**
- No lying**
- Kids always obedient to their parents**
- And parents always patient with their kids.**
- If any friction comes up, it is dealt with within a half hour.**

In real family life there are always arguments, poor communication, blaming others, grudges mistakes. Yes, even the Holy Family.

Then how do we deal with this image of the Holy Family being an “all together” family? We may begin by looking at the choice of the Gospel for today. The reading highlights the only argument which the Holy Family gets into recorded in all sacred scripture.

Jesus is depicted as a 12 year old bolting from his parents on their visit to the big capital city, Jerusalem. The parents are a bit teed off at him and let him know it. He responds briskly saying that “I must be about his father’s business!” This is not such a good cameo image of the Holy Family getting along with one another.

One mother interpreted this scene of the Jesus at the temple as a “typical 12 year old lip” that needed to be resisted.

But in scripture, the stories of Jesus’ birth and childhood usually are a prediction of something which will rise in the public life of the Lord. What could this story of Holy Family in the temple be telling us?

One of the questions which troubled the early Church is the violent death of Jesus. Even though they believed he was risen and with them, they still had trouble dealing with his most degrading death: crucifixion involved being beaten until almost dead, stripped of all your clothing and nailed or tied to a cross for hours in a public place until you die. Why would the one Jesus called “Father” allow this?

Then the disciples began to think back on the story of the Holy Family going to the temple.

- **Just like the disciples did with Jesus at the beginning of his public life, the Holy Family had traveled from their home in Galilee to the capital city of Jerusalem.**
- **Just like the disciples, the Holy Family had some fear of what could happen in Jerusalem, this large center of religion and politics.**
- **Just like the disciples who warned Jesus not to confront the religious leaders out of fear, so too, were Joseph and Mary overwhelmed to see Jesus in the midst of the leading religious leaders teaching them and answering their questions.**
- **Just like the disciples, Jesus' parents must have begun questioning at much a deeper level just who Jesus was.**
- **And just as with his disciples, so with his parents did he proclaim that he must be about his father's business of bringing spiritual freedom and life to the world.**

Yes, contrary to everything either his disciples and his parents could imagine, he must be about his father's business of suffering, dying and rising.

(Pause)

And so, as we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family, and after reflecting on the gospel story today, if I were to give out a trophy for the family who best reflected the Holy Family, I would use some criteria very different from our common image of holiness.

Family holiness is not about perfection, nor is it about quick judgments about failure or pats-on-the-back judgments of success. *It is about people living in close relationship to one another and discerning shared opportunities for their shared Spirits to flourish....*

We take for granted the opportunity to let the Spirit flourish in our families. Not everyone has that opportunity. One of the young men who is one of the leaders of the basketball program in our gym on Sunday afternoons, has not had that family experiences.

Martel is 22 years old. He does not know who his father or mother is. He was a foster child for the first few years of his life and finally was adopted by a woman who died when he was seventeen.

Two weeks ago Martel was contacted by a young woman who asked him his birth date and his place of birth. Eventually he came to find

out that she was his sister. He also discovered that he had eleven brothers and sisters. The last few weeks have been an emotional high as he gets to know them. One of his young adult brothers has been living at his house. He looks just like Martel.

While Martel's heart overflows with joy, he still carries the pain of not being able to grow up with his family. Martel's story reminds us NOT to take our family life for granted. Each day is a new opportunity to let the life of the Spirit flourish in each one of us.

On this Holy Family Sunday, let us remember that family holiness is not about perfection, nor is it about quick judgments either about past failures or pats-on-the-back judgments of past successes. *It is about people living in close relationship to one another and discerning shared opportunities for their shared Spirits to flourish....*

This is the right question of every holy family: are we ready to act on the call of the Spirit to better our live together? (Shea, Following Love into Mystery, p 50)