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Does our church look amazing or what?!?

I wish you could have been here last Sunday at 12:30.

The minute our last Mass ended, an army of volunteers appeared...

almost magically, like Santa's elves...

and transformed our church from Advent to Christmas,

and I think they did an incredible job.

One of the things I loved seeing after each Christmas Mass

was all the families taking a family photo in front of the altar.

Seeing the grins, the hugs, and the love put a big smile on my face.

Every family looked so happy!

And I joked to a few families,

"Send me that picture, so I can remember you all

smiling and happy year round!"

My entire family is gathering (tomorrow) later today to celebrate Christmas.

We'll be at my sister's house near Frederick.

Between all my siblings, their children and children's children, there will be about 30 of us.

This year's gathering will be a bittersweet one.

It's the first Christmas since my dad passed away and his loss is felt by all of us.

That's the *bitter* part of bittersweet.

But as a family we have so much to celebrate---my nephew got married this past summer,

we're all blessed with reasonably good health, and homes and so much to be thankful for.

We are most blessed in our love for each other.

Today we celebrate the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph.

And even for them, family life was bittersweet,

but they teach us how to handle the challenges every family faces.

I know I say this each year, but it has to be said again.

SCREEN: holy ≠ perfect

When people hear the word "holy", they sometimes make the mistake of thinking that holy equals perfect, and it doesn't.

The Holy Family had struggles like every family....huge challenges.

From the minute the Angel Gabriel gave Mary the news that she would give birth to Jesus it was one challenge after another.

She was betrothed to Joseph, but according to their custom, they did not live together.

So when she was found with child, he decided to divorce her...quietly...

lest she suffer the penalty of being stoned to death which Jewish law demanded.

Then an angel assured Joseph that Mary was with child through the Holy Spirit.

That crisis was resolved then another challenge appeared:

they had to travel to Bethlehem because of Caesar's decree for a census...

right at the time the baby was due.

And we know what happened next....our manger scene here shows us:

there was no room in the inn, so the birth happened in a stable, without so much as a crib.

Next they had to flee to Egypt because Herod was searching for the child to kill it.

Once that crisis was resolved, there was some peace for them...for a few years,

until today's Gospel.

When Jesus was 12 years old they traveled to Jerusalem for Passover,

and Jesus and his parents got separated.

Well, separated makes it sound like no one was to blame.

The boy decided to stay behind when his family was heading for home,

causing a crisis that is every parent's worst nightmare...a lost child.

Here was Mary's reaction upon finding Jesus:

SCREEN: *"Son, why have you done this to us?*

Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety."

And he said to them,

"Why were you looking for me?

Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"

But they did not understand what he said to them.

I love that this is the Gospel reading for Holy Family Sunday!

Of all possible readings to show us a snapshot of their life,

we were given the one with family drama.

St. Luke who relates this story and the Church want us

to know that holiness does not equal perfection.

Being holy does not guarantee a stress free life.

God didn't encase the Holy Family in a protective bubble,

sealed off from the challenges every family faces.

They had misunderstandings, they probably had words.

Like every family, their lives were bittersweet, with joy and pain;

often at the same time.

What kept them going in the face of it all?

St. Paul provides the answer in today's second reading.

Here's what he wrote to the Colossians.

SCREEN: Brothers and sisters:

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.

See, Paul recognized that family life is difficult.

He knew that every family struggles....every family.

And he proposes a remedy, a prescription for harmony in the family when times get tough.

He says, be compassionate, be kind and humble and gentle and patient, forgive and love.

Forgive and love.

He doesn't say it will be easy; is not saying life will be painless or problem free.

But by keeping our eyes on love,

God will get us through.

But let's talk about love for a moment.

Love doesn't mean avoiding people you have issues with or avoiding difficult conversations.

And it doesn't mean you have to approve of everything a family member does or says.

That's not love, it's denial.

And here is where Mary and Joseph give us a powerful example.

When their 12 year old son was lost, they could have decided,

'let's not say anything when we find him.

After all, he's going to be the messiah, he probably knows best.'

No, their attitude was, *"we're the parents, he's our son and he's 12 years old!*

He really worried and upset and frightened us and he's going to hear about it!"

And he did!

They didn't avoid the difficult conversation.

And because they didn't we heard that their 12 year old son

went home with them and was obedient to them.

Today's Gospel passage ended with this sentence:

SCREEN: Jesus advanced in wisdom and age and favor before God and man.

In other words, he grew up, and turned out great because of his family's love.

They were patient, kind and forgiving: they put on love.

Now, I know not every family drama you or I face turns out happy.

A fairy tale ending is sometimes just that...a fairy tale.

But with love, and with God and faith, you and I can weather any storm.

You can face any drama and you can grow in wisdom and favor with God and others.

There is drama in every family....in mine, and yours, and in the family of the Church.

This has been a hard year for lots of families, including the Catholic Church, which is

Christ's family.

We should expect more in 2019.

But no matter what our families face, God will be with us and God will get us through.

So long as we keep our eyes on Christ and strive to love everyday.

And to love everyone, always.

Families come in all shapes and sizes.

Here at St. Pius our message is that everyone is welcome here, because everyone matters. That's not something we came up with, it comes from Christ. He had his parents, then he formed a new family called the Church. And in his new family, he made brothers and sisters of those no one else wanted anything to do with. And people who were nothing like Jesus, liked Jesus. That's the vision of the Kingdom...God's family. I wish I could say this is a message you'll hear in every church, sadly I know it's not. It's even sadder to say that it's not a message that was always preached here at St. Pius. We have a long ways to go from words of welcome to reality. But if we commit to loving like Christ, we will get there. And spending time with Christ is one great way to grow in love.

SCREEN: Friday Night Praise screen

As we start a new year this week, I want to encourage you to join us this coming Friday, January 4th for Friday Night Praise starting at 7pm. It's 90 minutes of contemporary praise music, prayer, scripture, adoration and quiet time. If you can't stay the whole time, come for as long as you want. Bring a friend, bring a family member, come as a family. Spend some time with Christ, pour out your blessings and challenges to him and join with other members of His family in prayer and praise. I guarantee you'll be starting your new year off right and giving your family a precious gift.

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I'd like to end today's message with our traditional blessing of families. Please stand and remain standing after the blessing. And if you are here with family, and feel so inclined, why not hold hands or place an arm around each other? And if your family members are not with you or have passed away, hold them close to your heart.

(extend hands over congregation)

O God, you have created us in love and saved us in mercy. You have established the family and willed that it should become a sign of Christ's love for His Church. Shower your love upon all our families. May your blessings flow from those gathered here out to any family members who are away and those who have preceded them in death. Protect and watch over these families. Fill them with your strength and your grace. May they enjoy prosperity and possess the priceless gift of peace today and all the days of the new year. We ask this through Christ our Lord (+), amen.

I wish I had my camera...you all look “picture perfect!”

Now let's profess our faith.