

[Readings: Sirach 3:2-6, 12-14; Psalm 128; Colossians 3:12-21; Luke 2:22-40]

So, how was your Christmas family celebration this year? Joy-filled? Sad? Uneventful? Dramatic? Many years ago, while I was on vacation, I noticed and purchased some t-shirts for me and for my brother and two sisters. The slogan printed on the front was simple: “We put the ‘fun’ in dysfunctional!” I never worked up the nerve to give it to them! Eventually, I pitched the t-shirts. I said to my siblings, “We are all crazy, but I am the least crazy!” That started a debate!

Family is one of the purest joys of life, if we understand who we are and what we are about. Healthy families help each member discover a sense of self and a sense of purpose: who I am and what is expected of me. Love and mutual care are given by parents and siblings. Each family member finds the strength to achieve, to accomplish great things and simple things. A family helps us develop a sense of humor. I thank both my parents for that great gift.

We learn compassion, morality and ethics from what our parents teach us. We learn sympathy and empathy for the needs of others. Most importantly, we discover who God is and what the Church is for us first and foremost in the family. Parents teach the best by their example. So do clergy and religious.

If we are honest, we must also realize the tragedy of broken families. The reasons are many: illness, death, divorce, abuse, alienation, war, even natural disasters play a role. We learn how fragile and delicate family relationships are. And after enough broken promises and broken hearts, reconciliation and healing seem virtually impossible.

My guess is that your family and my family fall somewhere in the middle. Our readings for today’s Feast of the Holy Family show us how to live and how to love in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, for richer and for poorer. For these words apply not only to the relationship of husband and wife, but of every family relationship we can think of.

Here is the first rule parents must remember: Their child is a gift from God, and it is up to them to offer their child to God.

Not only in the noble vocation of priesthood or religious life, but to teach them how to live daily as a son or daughter of God. To teach them about their faith, about their life in the Church. Our Readings for the Feast of the Holy Family give us practical guidelines for parent/child and all relationships.

From our First Reading from the Book of Sirach: Whoever honors their parents atones for sins, and are preserved from them. When they pray, they are heard and are given what they truly need. They store up riches who honor their parents and they will live a full life. Whoever obeys one parent pleases the other. Then follows the command to take care of our parents when they are old, even when their mind fails, to be considerate.

And in our Second Reading, St. Paul gives us this practical advice; see if you practice this in your families: Put on heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another; if one has a grievance against another, forgive as the Lord has forgiven you. And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection.

Let the peace of Christ control your hearts, and be thankful. Admonish one another, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Pope Francis summarizes it this way: The three phrases we need to say to each other the most are these: "May I?" "Thank you." And "I'm sorry."

Now we move to today's Gospel. Jesus is presented in the Temple, not only for the feast of Passover. He is close to the age of His bar mitzvah, which means and literally makes Him a "son of the Law." Jesus, in staying behind, learning more clearly what His mission and purpose were about. Imagine Jesus standing inside such an impressive building, built of white marble and lined with gold, high arches and deep halls, and impressive men in expensive robes. Jesus realizing in His humanity for the first time, that His own body was a temple of His divinity, and would be destroyed and then raised up in three days.

Now, as noble as the excuse was that Jesus gives His parents, He still was kind of disobedient to them, in that He didn't stay close to them in the large

crowds. He didn't tell them where He was going. He didn't tell them where He was going to be.

I was about the same age of twelve when I became separated from my Mom at the K Mart at Sherwood and Outer Drive in Detroit. Instead of agreeing to meet at a pre-selected location at a pre-determined time, we just went our separate ways. Imagine how delighted I was to hear over the loudspeaker: "Nicky Zukowski, your mommy is at the customer service desk waiting for you." I took my time slithering with my head down toward the customer service desk at the front of store, thinking all eyes were on me. Mom just looked at me and smiled. Point Mama! I never did THAT again!

Things were more severe in the time of Jesus. Would you believe that Jewish law actually allowed parents to throw stones at their rebellious teenagers to keep them in line? And that mothers were usually in the front row of stone throwers and had to be physically restrained? Talk about a mother's love! Imagine losing your 5-year-old in a store for only three very long minutes. How about your teen arriving home three hours after curfew? Or your adult children reaching your home three days after they said they would be there?

That's what Joseph and Mary felt. And what of Jesus' response to Joseph? He could have said, "You're not the boss of me! You're not my REAL father!" Instead, he says, "I must be in my Father's house." Other translations say, "My Father's work" or "business." One says, "among those who belong to my Father." But Jesus is of the house of Joseph. Joseph is of the house of David. Joseph and Mary must have pondered in their heart that the work of their son must now begin. And Jesus does go with them obediently, to grow in wisdom, age and the favor of the Lord.

Our Catholic teaching says that every household is a domestic church, a "mini-church," just as we have mini-marts and mini-malls. On this Holy Family Sunday, let us remember that every one of us, regardless of age, gender or status, is a son or daughter of God. St. John reminds us that we are God's children NOW – not at some point in the future. So that means we need to treat each other and ourselves as Christ would have us do, with mutual respect,

reverence and, dare I say it, love. We are commanded to believe and to love as Christ loves. We do have the tools to become a Holy Family in our own right. Let us pray for the will and the wisdom to use them wisely. AMEN!