

Pastor's Holy Family – December 31st 2017

Today's Holy Family readings present us with some outstanding senior citizens of our Judeo-Christian tradition. We hear about Abraham who lived till the age of 175; and his wife Sarah who was 126 when she died! We also hear about Simeon who was likely in his eighties and Anna who was 84. So, on this "family day," here's a little senior citizen story:

A little silver-haired lady calls her neighbor and says: "Please come over here and help me. I have a killer jigsaw puzzle, and I can't figure out how to get started." So, her neighbor asks, "What is it supposed to be when it's finished?" The little silver haired lady says, "According to the picture on the box, it's a rooster." ... Her neighbor decides to go over and help with the puzzle. She lets him in and she shows him where she has the puzzle spread all over the kitchen table. He studies the pieces for a moment, then looks at the box, then turns to her and says: "First of all, no matter what we do, we're not going to be able to assemble these pieces into anything resembling a rooster." He takes her hand and says, "Secondly, I want you to relax. Let's have a nice cup of tea, and then, after a little time he says with a deep sigh, "Let's put all the Kellogg's Corn Flakes back into the box."

That story has nothing to do with Holy Family Sunday! But you know what – that story has everything to do with Holy Family Sunday! Because family life and Christin life and parish-family life begins with patience! Patience with love! Patience with our beloved aging parents and grandparents; patience with rambunctious children; patience with maturing adolescents; patience with our imperfect spouses and parents; patience with our annoying brothers and sisters; (at any age) patience with one another; and even, patience with God – who answers our prayers (as we hear in today's first reading from Genesis) in a way that is best for us – in the long run (and in His 'time')!

Every family in the world, every family in the history of the world, had or has issues and imperfections! There's no escape from family struggles! If you have NO family issues – you are 1 in a million or more. Even the Holy Family we highlight today had its problems: an un-planned pregnancy; (Joseph accepting paternity of and adopted the divine Son); misunderstanding about what's happening; a cold and bitter journey for delivery; un-expected visitors to entertain, bringing mostly impractical gifts; the threats of Herod; the ordeal of fleeing as migrants to Egypt; 2 years of immigration and self-detention in Egypt – and then the return; plus, a 12-year old son forgets to inform his parents or get permission to wander – and then gets lost; and, an adult son who finds his Mission in life – which brings great sorrow (and 'pierces' the heart) of His mother!

Situations like that were "atypical" but real in the Holy Family and they are real in our families! Every family at some point in times resembles the reality of the Holy Family. They lived in a 'stable' at one point and they were 'un-stable' at times! But they had each other and they had faith in God! That's what got them through and that's what brings us here!

From the simplest family in the world to the most well-known and wealthiest – family problems exist: instability; alcohol and substance issues, health problems, etc. etc. etc, etc!!!! You name it it's all there – in my family and probably yours too. And, it all needs to be "worked-through" day aby day – patience with love !!! Every family has some problems!

In Friday's NEWSDAY, there was a story about Prince Harry's engagement to Meghan Markle. It seems that Meghan's half-sister (Samantha Grant) took exception to a comment by Prince Harry, who said that: "The royal family would be the family that Meghan never had." Meaning that finally, Meaghan would be in a stable family! Well, there's a whole long story why that didn't go over well! And a whole long story why people in glass houses shouldn't throw stones!" "Murphy's Law" is always operative in family life – if it can go wrong – it will go wrong! Weather it's the royal family, or the church family, yours or mine – there are "issues" to be resolved and we need patience (above all) plus wisdom and time and love to work through them!

Our readings today underscore the need for patience in our lives! In the first reading from Genesis, we hear about an ancient married couple – Abraham and Sarah – who very much need to employ the virtue of patience! As the second reading from Hebrews tells us, "*Abraham went out – not knowing where he was going.*" But he trusted that God would provide! That's the way it is with us. We don't have a pre-recorded video of what will transpire in life that we can fast-forward to check out the outcome. We don't know what this New Year will bring. But we come to this "temple" to "present" ourselves with the hopes that "God is with us" – individually and as a family!

Like most couples, Abraham and Sarah had counted on having children! After long years of disappointment, they faced old age without heirs! Then God made a promise to miraculously change their fate! Abraham committed his faith to the bargain, and the child arrived who would make his descendants “*like stars in the sky!*” Parenthood in the senior years isn’t the usual destination! But the word impossible is not in God’s dictionary! A simple plan it wasn’t! But it fulfilled the divine purposes just fine! Abraham needed patience with God and God had patience with Abraham’s gradual growth in faith!

In the Gospel story, where do we find the Holy Family? In the same kind of setting we’re in right now – the Temple! Mary and Joseph were stepping way out of the normal scheme of things to embrace this unique family plan - this Holy Family blueprint! How did they do it? Step by step, day by day – trusting the ongoing guidance of prayer!

We also meet two old, wise and extremely patient folks Simeon and Anna! Simeon, a man who’d spent his life waiting for God’s atypical activity, and Anna, a prophetess used to spotting divine interventions and markings whenever she saw them! Both blessed and announced the revelation of this child! Simeon and Anna told Mary & Joseph – that family life wouldn’t be easy – but that God is with them! They were undertaking the hardest, the most awesome and the most important vocation of all – parenthood. Then and now, there’s no “tell-all” manual to do it perfectly. It was trial and error for Joseph and Mary and every parent!

Simeon was clear that the great news contained its own share of pain: for Mary and Joseph, for the child’s bitter enemies, and also for his devoted friends! As old Abraham might remind us, you have to commit your faith to the bargain! The word: “Impossible” is just not a word God recognizes! But it does require (like the joke about the “Corn Flakes”) - PATIENCE!

I came across a schematic of my own family that one of my sisters-in-law composed after an unpleasant Christmas dinner about ten years ago. The “chart” is entitled “The Caldwell’s – A Dysfunctional Family! Each person’s “box” has his or her name and a description. So, my father’s name is at the top labeled as “dysfunctional patriarch,” and my mother as “dysfunctional matriarch.” And then each kid in the family is listed. So, I’m the oldest and it says: “Frank – dysfunctional child number one.” Then it lists my nine siblings and grandchildren as dysfunctional, except one family that has the “perfect child; perfect in-law and perfect children!” It wasn’t our best moment as a family – but we worked through it. And at least the meal was good!

Yes – well, every single family, including the Holy Family, is at least (sometimes) “dysfunctional!” We don’t function the way we should or the ordinary way expected! Welcome to the “Club” of Humanity – from God’s family – to your family and mine! But as someone once said to me – the only worse thing than having a family – is not having one! Indeed, Pope Francis said recently: “there is no ‘ideal’ family – but always the ‘ideal’ of the family.”

Families come in all shapes and sizes! However your family is configured, know that God wants to make a **home** with you! Make a place for the Lord in your family’s life by coming to church each week and by praying for and with each other during the week! The family that prays together – usually has a much great chance – of staying together!

The other day as Christians – we were happy to say: “Merry Christmas” because GOD IS WITH US! Today – hopefully – despite all our warts, impatience and imperfections – we can happily say – HAPPY FEAST DAY, because like Mary and Joseph, God is with our families!

Happy Feast of The Family – the Holy Family, yours and mine! Let’s try to make New Year a time to grow in patience with one another in “*wisdom, age and grace*” in 2018!

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