

Feast of the Holy Family

Cycle A, 12.29.19

Sirach 3:2-6,12-14/Colossians 3:12-21/

Matthew 2:13-15,19-23

THE PERFECTION OF SELF THROUGH THE GRACE OF TOGETHERNESS

I have some misgivings about the timing of today's feast, celebrating the Holy Family on the first Sunday following Christmas. For some folks this is the time they overdose on family. In fact, after the parties and cooking and visiting and obligations and expectations and disappointments, some have had about as much "family" as they can take.



Parents are wondering when the kids go back to school. Kids are wanting to be left alone. A little togetherness goes a long way – for every generation. But then comes this Feast. We're challenged to look at what it means to be family... and our eyes turn toward the Christmas crèche, the Nativity scene.

During this time of year, we tend to sentimentalize the Holy Family – they become figures of plaster and paper, not flesh and blood. But we forget: they weren't that different from us. They were holy, yes. But they were also human. The story of the Holy Family is the story of life not always turning out the way you expected. It's the story of a teenage mother, conceiving a child before she

was married. It's the story of an anxious father, confronting scandal, planning on divorce. It's the story of a family forced to become refugees, living as immigrants in the land that once held their ancestors as slaves.



It's the story of a missing child, and days of anxious searching by his parents. At least one gospel writer goes even further and describes an incident in which the relatives of Jesus were so alarmed, they thought he had lost his mind, and set out to seize him. Not long after came his violent death – one his mother watched with helplessness and almost unimaginable sorrow. This family was holy, but it was also human. We need these reminders as we share in our own family life, whatever form it takes today.

There is a model for understanding the human mind and personalities that make up families and communities. It's called the **Enneagram**—you may have heard of it or even used it. It's been promoted in business management and in spirituality contexts through seminars and conferences. In business settings it's used to help people gain insight into workplace interpersonal dynamics and to help establish good working relationships. In spirituality settings it's more commonly presented as a way to higher states of being and a path to greater enlightenment. For many people, including myself, it can be an aid to personal growth and self-awareness. The Enneagram is a circle with nine points to it. Each point represents a personality type – a theme or way of reacting that represents a

person's dominant passion in approaching life, his or her primary "operating style." In spirituality each point on the Enneagram represents a different approach to and way of understanding God and oneself.



So, for instance, the "1" on the Enneagram circle is the "Perfectionist" or "Reformer." That type wants to do things right. They're good members on a team that is working on projects with lots of details. They know how to get the job done. On the other hand, the "1" has an expectation that everyone else should be as exacting as he or she is. They can be difficult to live or work with and very judgmental: "I want things MY way." They're harsh on themselves and everyone else as well who doesn't meet their standards of perfection. In order to grow they need to rely on the strength and qualities of another number on the circle. In the case of "1's," they need to gravitate to the qualities of the "7" -- the "Enthusiast" who, in their best self, can be content with things as they are.

Each number on the Enneagram has its strength (the "4" is the "Individualist"; the "9" is the "Peacemaker"). And each number has its basic flaw, its Achilles tendon (for the "Achiever-3" it's Deceit; for the "Investigator-5", it's Greed). I like to think of that Enneagram circle as representing the fullness of God – God who is perfection, who contains us and all aspects of us. Each person, each one of us, each point on that circle, has the potential to be a reflection of God, an aspect of the Divine, even though we can never be God. That's why we need family; that's why

we need one another. Put us all together and we have something great, a reflection of the Divine. Pulled apart and left to our own devices, we can get lost is the worst aspect of our personalities – our shadow side – the "unredeemed" dimension of our God-given personalities and selves.

We see it happening in the Church. Be sure to watch the new movie, "The Two Popes" and see the portrayal of the difference between Pope Benedict and Pope Francis – one seeing renewal in the Church as nothing but **compromise** and loss; the other seeing renewal as necessary **change**, without which we stagnate. It provides keen insight into our present-day struggles between progressives and traditionalists the Church.



We're living through it every day as it's happening in government with the impeachment hearings. See the movie "The Report" that dramatizes the political intrigue of the investigation of the CIA's use of torture following the attacks of September 11. Watch **Integrity** at odds with **Expediency**. The realities and tensions of coming together whether in family or Church or government are ever-present. St. Paul's admonishment today could not be more relevant, even though we seldom see it played out on life's public stage: *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. And let the peace of Christ control your hearts, the peace into which you were called in one body.

Jean Vanier, a Canadian philosopher, theologian and humanitarian who died this past May, founded a movement called "L'Arche" – an international federation of communities in 37 countries for people with developmental disabilities and those who assist them. A governing philosophy of the communities is Vanier's belief that people with disabilities are teachers, rather than burdens bestowed upon families.



In one of his writings Vanier told the story that if a prize was offered to a group of Canadian Indian children for the first one to answer a question, *"they would all work out the answer together and shout it at the same time. They couldn't bear one to win, leaving the rest of them losers. The winner would be separated from the rest. One would have won the prize but lost solidarity."* Recognizing the uniqueness of gifts in different persons in our families, in our Church and in government and society can lead either to completing or competing, depending on our appreciation and understanding of why God made each of us different. The world will be holier to the degree that we see the reason in God's desire that we complete one another, not compete against each other.



In his coming among us as a member of the Holy Family, Christ has opened the circle of God's life and love to embrace us all. Our New Year's challenge for 2020 is to open the circle of our lives to embrace all those who are members of this human family.

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