

## **Feast of the Holy Family**

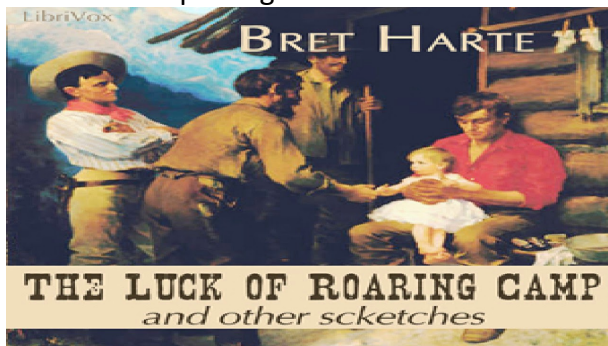
Cycle A, 12.29.19

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

Matthew 2:13-15,19-23

### ***WE ARE LUCKY TO BE FAMILY- ONE FAMILY IN CHRIST***

In 1868 Bret Harte wrote a short story entitled "The Luck of Roaring Camp". The story takes place in a California camp of gruff, hard drinking, loud and fierce gold diggers. Killing, fighting, profanity, gambling, intoxication and the stink of strong body odor were the ordinary state of the camp. One day, a woman who was a regular visitor to the camp miners died in childbirth in one of the camp cabins, but the child, a boy, survived. The identity of his father was unknown and could not be determined. Deaths were common in Roaring Camp, but a birth was something completely new. The men of the camp took responsibility for the baby. He was their baby and they were determined to give him a proper home. They spruced up a cabin and took turns taking care of the baby. To hold him and feed him and to sing to him was considered a privilege.



They demanded from each other previously unheard of things such as decent language, no yelling (It had been called Roaring Camp!) and personal hygiene. The men began to shed their roughness, their anger and their selfishness. The little orphan child transformed this outpost of rough, crude miners into a community of generosity,

tenderness and compassion. The baby called forth from these reckless characters and criminals a dignity, worth and sense of beauty, wonder and joy. For the sake of the orphan baby they became a family.

Today we celebrate the feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, and our call to holiness in our own family. In our contemporary culture where there may well be two fathers or two mothers or divorced and remarried parents with blended families or a single parent or two non-binary parents or other situations, we may wrongly think that the nuclear family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph is irrelevant to us. Jesus, Mary and Joseph did not live apart in isolation from others but lived in a village among close relatives.



They lived in community and were part of the larger, extended Jewish community in a covenantal relationship with God. Scholars speculate that Nazareth of Jesus' lifetime was probably a small rural community of about 100 people where most people were related and everyone knew everyone else and everyone's business. The gospels speak of Jesus' mother and brothers and sisters, so while Jesus may not have had biological siblings, he had close, caring relatives and he himself said people who do the will of his heavenly Father are his family.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for us sometimes is to love our immediate family members, the people with whom we interact most often and the people most aware of our words and actions and also the words or actions which can upset or hurt us. Our task is to support one another as we go through all of life's changes whether they happen in infancy, adolescence, young adulthood, parenting, middle age or as elders while remaining strongly interconnected: individually with God, with our biological extended family and with our community.

In the letter to the Colossians we are told how to be a holy family: by being compassionate, gentle, kind, humble, bearing with one another, forgiving one another and above all by loving. We are to let peace control our hearts and to let the Word of God dwell in our hearts. We are to do everything, all of our deeds and all of our speaking, in the name of the Lord Jesus.



Surely this sometimes difficult to do with strangers or enemies, but it is often even harder to be compassionate, gentle, kind, humble, forgiving and loving with the same people we see through all of the messiness of our lives, especially sometimes among siblings or with in-laws or between generations.

An important part of being a holy family is subordinating one's own preferences and desires and rights and privileges to the great good of the community. We need not focus on Paul's remark on the patriarchy of Greek households. Earlier in the same letter he had written that in Christ there is no Jew or Greek, no slave or free, but that Christ is all and in all. Paul's intent was to help families to live together in peace and in love. Also earlier in the letter Paul had written for the Colossian Christians to put away all anger, fury, malice, slander, and obscene language. This was precisely the change the baby wrought in the men of Roaring Camp as they became compassionate, gentle, kind, humble and loving.

When members of our family fail to subordinate themselves and their opinions, preferences and desires, when it is a real and concrete challenge to be forgiving and loving, it can be hard to celebrate a feast like this one today. The Holy Family is lifted up by Matthew as an example for us. Their plans had to keep changing with Mary's unforeseen pregnancy, the census-required journey to Bethlehem and subsequent childbirth in a stable, their flight into Egypt as refugees, their return to Galilee, and their accidentally leaving Jesus behind in Jerusalem when he was 12 years old are some of the situations mentioned in the gospels. Surely Mary and Joseph and their whole extended family had to have had some discussions, perhaps heated discussions, about these events and others, but through it all they loved and respected and listened and subordinated their dreams and desires for the

greater good of one another and especially the child Jesus. It was no easier for them than it is for any parent. They were not perfect but they were a holy family.

On Christmas Day, NPR carried a follow-up story about a community in Newton, Massachusetts, that was first reported nationally last February. A young couple had moved into a tight-knit, established neighborhood and they were very delighted and surprised to be welcomed with cookies, casseroles and even a neighborhood pictorial directory. Three months after moving into the neighborhood their daughter was born and to their surprise she is deaf. The parents embraced the changes they would have to make for the sake of their daughter, like learning American Sign Language.

Their daughter is now almost three years old. What was first reported last February, though, was that shortly after her birth, their neighbors also embraced changes so that they could be part of the little girl's life and communicate with her. Four residents quietly began to take an adult education class in American Sign Language. They liked the instructor so much they hired him to come to one of their homes once a week and teach American Sign Language with a specialized vocabulary focused on interaction with a child to a class of 20 neighbors so they could greet and interact with the little girl who would be growing up in their midst.



The Christmas update tells that an additional 20 people in the neighborhood have decided to also learn ASL so a second weeknight class has been added! Her father told NPR: *"We're just so thankful that we live here and we're surrounded by these wonderful people. Our daughter is included and she's happy. It's absolutely amazing that she feels so at home and they're signing to her. It's like being surrounded by family."* Indeed, surrounded by a holy family. With God's grace may we be respectful and loving to the members of our families, young and old, near and far, that we, too, might be formed into a holy family, especially the family of God called Church. May God be blessed.



*Merry Christmas  
Paul Dechant, OSFS*