

Opening the Word: Honoring the family

Advertising tends to romanticize family life. Christmas meals are celebrated on pristine tables, while adults, teens and children share a bucolic feast.

This romantic commercialization of the family can creep into our understanding of Jesus' family. We imagine a saccharine picture of a perfect clan, enjoying each other's company while engaged in pastoral household practices.

This understanding of the family is novel within human history. The heart of the family in the Scriptures consists of a series of institutional relationships that govern our conduct.

In Sirach, we are told that a father and mother have authority over children. Honoring one's father atones for sins. Honoring one's mother stores up riches in heaven. Even when one's father is old, kindness is expected.

[Feast of the Holy Family – Dec. 30, 2018](#)

SIR 3:2-6, 12-14

OR 1 SM 1:20-22, 24-28

PS 128:1-2, 3, 4-5

OR PS 84:2-3, 5-6, 9-10

COL 3:12-21 OR 3:12-17

OR 1 JN 3:1-2, 21-24

LK 2:41-52

The wisdom of Sirach can help us look anew at a scene from Jesus' life that we all know well – his finding in the Temple. Note that Jesus and his parents go up to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover. The entire family has given itself over to a law not of its own making. This includes the Wisdom from on High, the one who is born Emmanuel, God is with us.

Jesus, as the Gospel of Luke continues, is not like other 12-year-old boys. He enters into the Temple, instructing the teachers with authority. He lets his parents leave, assuming the authority that is only proper to the Word made flesh.

His parents make a mad dash back to Jerusalem once they recognize their son has been forgotten. And although Jesus proclaims his authority, his ultimate destiny to be with the Father, he nonetheless succumbs to his parents' will: "He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them ..." (Lk 2:51).

In this act of obedience, the mystery of Christmas is made present. The King of all nations, the Giver of the Law, has become himself the obedient son. There is nothing else for the Gospel to report in Jesus' early life because there was nothing remarkable to notice. He became son to a father and a mother, and he honored them.

This hidden love, a prolonged period of silence in the Gospels, is marked by duty. Jesus becomes son not through "feeling" like it. He becomes son because that is who he is.

In this sense, the goal of the feast of the Holy Family is not for us to feel guilty that we cannot reach the holiness of the Son of God, his Immaculate Mother, and most just Joseph. Instead, we are to see the possibility of holiness in something so mundane – the daily practice of being dad or mom, son or daughter.

We don't have to transcend these normal, human relationships to practice holiness. For within the family, we can let the peace of Christ dwell among us: "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another ..." (Col 3:12-13).

We don't have to construct some perfect family, one where there is never a moment of disharmony, to imitate the Holy

Family. We need nothing more than the wisdom of obedient, life-transforming love.

If it's good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for us.

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