

FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY

2 Christmas, Year A – January 2, 2005

The Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year! Don't you just love the holidays? It's one of those wonderful opportunities to get together with the family! Everyone is so happy to see you and everything is so perfect. We have many fond memories created by these times. I can tell by look on some of your faces that this isn't always so! The holidays bring with them the expectation of the perfect family gatherings ... that seem very illusive! Maybe that is why we have all those movies about family gatherings that talk about the messy, often disastrous gatherings!

What is "family?" The definition of family has been rapidly changing. What constitutes a family? You might be surprised by the answer. My wife, Diane, and I will celebrate our 30th wedding anniversary on Tuesday. We have two great children, Jennifer and Sean. What I have learned over the years is that we are considered the "ideal" or "average" family. I have also learned that we are no longer the norm. We are the exception.

Today, one of our every four adults is single. How do they fit into the definition of family? One out of every two adults is living in a "committed relationship", but they are not married. One out of every two marriages ends in divorce. One out of every three children lives with only one adult. Our old definitions of family do not fit the norm any more. We have to understand that "family" can mean many different things.

One of my brothers has married twice and is now divorced. He has seven children. His oldest daughter just moved back in with him with his first grandchild. Is this a family? My other brother and wife had one child, but couldn't have anymore. Last year they adopted another child. Is this family? I remember a time when adopted children were looked down upon. A mother of an adopted friend set me right when I was a kid. She said that she and her husband chose my friend to be their son. They considered themselves to be a family.

When I was growing up, my family spent every weekend with one set of grandparents or the other. We would drive from Syracuse, New York to Elmira, New York or Mansfield, Pennsylvania. I spent summers on my grand parents farm. My mother was the oldest of eight children, so there were always lots of aunts, uncles, cousins and other semi-related people around. Now that's family! I knew most of the family. Today, many grand parents and grand children hardly know each other. They live far apart and rarely, if ever, see each other.

Last weekend, Diane, Sean and I drove to Connecticut after Christmas to be with her family. We visited her Dad and step mom and had dinner with the whole family. Her brother and his family were there. Her step bother and his family were there too. Only Jennifer, our daughter wasn't there in person, but thanks to the cell phone, she called and was there in spirit. I remember Grant, Diane's stepbrother saying, "I have six parents!" The nature of the family has changed.

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I become annoyed at politicians who call for “family values.” I think we need to embrace Christian values instead. The nature of the family has changed, and these politicians use family values as a way to exclude certain people from their frame of reference. They long for something that may have never been, and cloak their prejudices in a catchy phrase. Beware these people! Family values do not always translate into Christian values.

Today we read and hear about the Holy Family. The story talks about Mary, baby Jesus and Joseph. For the longest time, the Church has pointed to them as the model family. What model do we really have? What can we learn about families that are applicable to us in this age? First, we need to understand that the Holy Family is a “blended” family! It’s common today to find blended families in our midst. Remember that Joseph is not Jesus’ father! Jesus himself would never marry as far as we know (this was not typical for a rabbi in his era). But they are still family! The models they hold out are what I refer to as Christian values.

We are Christian families, called to see the Holy family and model ourselves after them. What is the model presented to us today? What are the values? When we look at Joseph, we see what we are called to be ... people who have faith, love, and protect the family. Listen to the story again. Joseph has already taken a pregnant Mary and traveled to Bethlehem. In a dream, after the child is born, an angel tells him to flee to Egypt. Joseph responds in faith. He is a God centered man. He acts to protect his family. Joseph will not return until another dream, with another angel’s message. Here are the values that transcend the ages: faith in God, acting to protect the family, living in love.

An article in the Living Church on the text noted that when we offer unconditional love in the family, we raise up loving adults. They added when we offer help and protection, we raise up responsible adults. I would add that when faith and belief in God are part of our family relationships, we raise up adults who have hope. Too often I see what happens when these things don’t happen. Conditional love creates sociopath and broken adults. Self-absorption and jealousy in relationships create manipulative and self-centered people. Suspicious and doubting lead to people whom are sneaky, “users” and despairing people.

There is something else that we must focus on with the Holy Family. Behind the family is the notion of incarnation ... the indwelling of God with us as one of us! God chooses to come into our midst as one of us. God ‘s love takes the form of Jesus Christ. The other notion is expressed in Ephesians; we are adopted by God to be sons and daughters. This reminds me of what I learned about adopted children in my youth. God CHOOSES us to be God’s sons and daughters. We adopted not because of anything we do, any status we attain, any wealth or possessions we have accumulated. God loves us, and chooses us to be part of God’s family!

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What the Holy Family models for us is an understanding that family definitions don't matter. What matters are the values we incorporate into the relationships. When we embrace faith, love and protection, we are living into life giving relationships. This is the way we become the family that God intends us to be!

I'm also struck by a startling fact this morning. Soon after his death, Mary, Jesus and Joseph become refugees. They are forced to flee for their lives because of the terror, the threat of death from the powerful. Not much has changed in nearly two millennia. We live in a world where millions of people are refugees. We have watched on the television and read in the newspapers of the thousands, tens of thousands, now hundreds of thousands lost or killed by the tsunami. Natural disasters and war have forced people to flee or fear for their lives in Asia, Africa, South America, Northern Ireland, Central America and elsewhere. What is our relationship to these people? Are they family too?

As Christians, we are called to recognize that we are part of a larger family. It extends beyond our immediate biological relations, the walls of this building and our local community. There is an older couple in this parish that experienced this larger concept of family. The husband fell and was rushed to the hospital. The sick wife was kept company at home by a neighbor until her son and daughter-in-law arrived. When I got to the hospital, people ... not relatives ... were there checking up on the stricken old man. Family is not bound to just blood relations.

We are reminded that we are part of God's family, and that takes in a whole world! We are called to expand our definitions and concepts of family. We are called as Christians to use the values held out to us to make a difference not only in our lives but in the lives of countless others. We remember this day the Holy Family. Go; adopt the world, remembering that God has adopted us! Go; offer faith, hope, love and protection. Go, in the name of the baby Jesus, and make the world your family!