

Date: December 28, 2003

SUNDAY: Christmas 1 (Holy Family)

SERMON: All in the Family

Text(s): 1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Luke 2:41-52

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During our international pastors and spouses conference in Cairo several years ago, we acquainted ourselves with the history and present life and mission of the Coptic Church of Egypt, one of the oldest Christian churches in continuous existence. Part of that experience was a visit to a church that sits right on the banks of the Nile called The Church of the Holy Family. According to pious legend, which over the centuries has been built up into quite a travelogue, the Holy family escaped Herod's slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem by fleeing into Egypt. And as luck would have it, they happened to take refuge in a grotto along the Nile on this very spot. So, of course, Christians later built a church over the sheltered grotto in the riverbank to hallow its memory. Today, of course, it's a major site of tourism and pilgrimage, complete with the usual flourishing souvenir shops.

But what caught our eyes was the plaque affixed to the wall of the church, written in rather fractured English, that announced that this was the place where the Holly Family (two l's) had found refuge. Well, you can imagine the fun that a group of irreverent preachers had with that. I think our Egyptian guides were perhaps a little perplexed at the gales of laughter, and the speculations as to which of the ancestors of the country-western singer Buddy Holly, this Egyptian Holly family might have been.

This first Sunday after Christmas has long been celebrated in the church as the Feast of the Holy (one l) Family, though any reliable information about the Holy Family is very scant. St. Luke is the only one of our canonical gospel writers who tells us even a single story about Jesus' childhood. Like all the stories about Jesus' birth in our New Testament, it seems to be built on a mixture of reinterpretations of Old

Testament stories, like the one we read from 1 Samuel this morning, and pious legend that began to develop within a generation or so after Jesus' death.

But though it is the only story of the childhood of Jesus in our gospels, it is nonetheless very significant for light it sheds on the whole issue of family dynamics. We all know how important families are; look at the efforts we make to be together with our families (or in some cases, to avoid being together with our families) at the holidays. The best-selling author John Grisham recently left off writing his legal thrillers long enough to write a satirical and funny novel called *Skipping Christmas* about a couple who get fed up with the whole over-commercialized and overly-familial emphasis of Christmas and decide to book a Caribbean cruise instead. The fact that that book also made the best-seller list, is at least some evidence that his quirky tale is hitting close to home for many families. As we all know, when families gather, there are always tensions as well as happiness. From our gospel lesson today, we learn that Jesus' family was no different. A precocious and headstrong adolescent boy behaves in a way that causes great anxiety to his parents; his mother chides him, only to find herself rebuked for failing to understand him. What parent of a teenager cannot immediately identify with that scene? For that reason, perhaps it is appropriate on this Feast of the Holy Family, to let this story about the family dynamics and tensions of Jesus' family illuminate the needs of our own families as well.

We're all aware, I think, that the very notion of family has undergone, and is still undergoing, some rather radical redefinition. Fifty years ago, and for most of human history before that, the word family meant the extended family— not only Mom, Dad, the kids, and grandparents, but aunts and uncles, cousins, and perhaps even great-grandparents. And most of those people lived within a relatively short distance of one another, often in the same town or village where they had lived for generations, and sometimes even under the same roof. That is

still true in many parts of the world, especially in rural or agrarian societies. Even today in the United States which has one of the most mobile populations of any nation, two thirds of all Americans live within 50 miles of where they were born. And even in the industrialized countries of the West, where the changing patterns of jobs and geography began to break up the extended family model, we could at least still conjure up the idealized image of the so-called nuclear family— Working Dad, stay-at-home Mom, and 2.4 happy children and perhaps at least one set of grandparents nearby.

Now, however, even that severely-truncated and idealized definition of family no longer holds. In fact according to the most recent statistics, only 7% of American families fit that romanticized nuclear-family description. We've gone from Ozzie and Harriet to Ozzie Osbourne. Both parents in most two-parent families now work outside the home. Single-parent families and blended families where two previously-married parents bring the children of their previous marriages into a single new family are extremely common. There are a fairly high number of families consisting only of grandparents who are raising their grandchildren. The definition of family is being further broadened by gay and lesbian couples adopting children.

Even where the nuclear family is intact, it frequently lives far from the extended families. Our own family is a case in point. My two brothers and their children live in Michigan, our parents live in Pennsylvania, Carol's sister and parents live in New Jersey, we live in Maine and our children live in New York City and Germany. And I'm sure it's much the same for many of your families.

Our redefined or disconnected families are facing tremendous stresses. Affluence or poverty, too much money or too little, can strain family ties to the breaking point. The destructive effects of the cycle of economic poverty are well-known and well-documented, for example in the

excellent series in the *Portland Press Herald* about rural poverty in northern Maine. Especially poignant was the story of the 16 year-old girl and her younger siblings, whose single-parent mother got so stressed at not being able to provide for her family that one night, she just walked out, abandoning them to their fate.

But we're also now discovering the destructive effects of affluence on families. In many upper middle-class suburban neighborhoods, the fashionable trend is for larger and larger houses for fewer and fewer people, so that parents and children hardly even need to interact with one another. Supermarkets are springing up that are stocked only with pre-prepared foods that need no cooking, but only reheating, so that any member of the family can eat at his or her own leisure, and the concept of the family table has almost disappeared altogether. Just a couple of years ago, the whole world was horrified at the story of the young boys in Columbine High School in Colorado who brought guns to school and began systematically shooting their classmates. In the shocking aftermath of that tragedy, people were asking themselves, "How could this happen?" These kids came from affluent, upper middle-class families, where they had lovely homes and were given everything they could ever want. Well, not everything, apparently. Giving adolescents "everything they could ever want," not only in the material sense, but also in virtual independence from adult supervision and guidance can easily become a substitute for giving them "the one thing necessary," their parents' attention and engagement.

All of which means, among other things, that family relationships and family tensions are being lived out within tighter and tighter circles, with fewer and fewer members of the traditional extended family to share the responsibilities of bringing up children or caring for the aging parents or grandparents. Everything rests on the shoulders of Mom and Dad, or just Mom or just

Dad, as the case may be, and as we've learned, Mom or Dad are not always up to the task.

In this "brave new world" that we now live in, it is hardly surprising that family breakdowns, and such phenomena as teen-aged drug addiction or child abuse or neglect of elderly parents are reaching staggering proportions. And because of the dilemmas that most families face between the pressures of jobs and the need for quality family time, there are no easy solutions. We cannot simply turn back the clock. Besides, the "good old days" were never quite so good as we remember them with the rose-tinted spectacles of memory. But we do need help in learning to live as families in the new and often confusing circumstances in which we find ourselves. For if one thing is certain, the family still remains *the* fundamental social unit. It can hardly be otherwise. To be human is to be a member of a family, whether inherited or created.

So perhaps this story of Luke, about the Holy Family can offer us a few clues that will help point us toward healthier family relationships. Luke emphasizes that Jesus was reared in an atmosphere where religious observance provided a structure for the family's life. He introduces the story by telling us that every year, Jesus' parents took him up to Jerusalem for the festival of Passover. This religious ritual was part of their family structure.

A few years ago, a survey in the United States discovered that children from families where religious beliefs and observances have played a strong role, have on the average, far fewer problems in their development than do children from families in which faith and religious observance play little or no part. I'm not talking about families that have distorted or neurotic religious practices, but families where genuine religious observance provides a structure to family life. In such families, on balance, children grow up with fewer problems. There is a positive correlation. As our culture becomes increasingly secularized, this is also becoming increasingly

difficult. In a setting where parents are often forced to choose between having their children in Sunday school or youth group or having them participate in the town soccer league or school hockey team, the Sunday school or youth group is almost always the loser. It's no mystery to me that in our era, there are virtually no young people entering seminary to study for the ministry or that the average age of the student body of virtually every seminary in the U.S. is over 45. Given the fact that in the majority of families for the last two generations, children have learned that while religion and church activities may be nice, they should never take precedence over school sports or theater or band or dance lessons or getting a lucrative job, it could hardly be otherwise.

Luke says that it was when Jesus was twelve years old, that the incident in this story took place. That's about the time of puberty—the transition from childhood to adolescence. It's a time when young people first begin to feel the stirrings of their own uniqueness and identity apart from their parents, when questions of vocation begin to arise. When Mary scolds Jesus for having frightened them, "*Child why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you with great anxiety.*" Jesus speaks up and says, "*Didn't you know that I must be in my Father's house?*" Quite apart from the fact that any parent of an adolescent can immediately identify with that experience, I wonder if Jesus would have been so inwardly prepared to be attentive to God and understand his vocation had his parents not been so faithful in providing him with the structure of religious belief and observance, and the opportunity of interacting with his elders in the faith?

Luke tells us that after Jesus' remark about the necessity of being in his Father's house, *Mary kept all these things in her heart and pondered over them.* She accepted that something was going on in her son's life that she could not necessarily understand, something mysterious,

and yet, perhaps important. So she had the wisdom not to assert her own will too hard, to stand to one side, as it were, to give that vocation room to assert itself in her son's life. Can we, like Mary, keep all these things in our hearts and ponder them, while at the same time setting our children free to follow the leading of the Spirit?

If striking the right balance between exerting parental control and giving increasing freedom for self-direction, while providing the structure of religious practice and belief in which that freedom can be most effectively exercised is one key to healthier family dynamics, a second surely is that parents cannot raise their children alone. Child-rearing is most effectively done in community.

We all remember Hilary Clinton's book title of a few years ago, *It Takes a Village* [to raise a child.] I'd propose that we substitute the word "congregation" for "village." It takes a congregation to raise a child to mature Christian adulthood. In a time when traditional family structures are breaking down, we have to form new families to take their place. And where better than the family of faith. One of the most common metaphors for the church in the New Testament is that of the family—the household of God. Early Christians saw themselves as brothers and sisters. And just as those who are siblings by birth take upon themselves the care of elderly relatives, so one of the first tasks the earliest Christians took on was the collective responsibility for widows and orphans—those who were without living children to care for them in their old age or children without living parents to nurture them to adulthood. The church became a family. The Christian family had all the support structures, as well as all the dysfunctions of any other family. They loved and laughed and ate and argued and fought and got angry and forgave one another and defended one another and nagged one another to do the right thing, just as extended families do. And they kept welcoming new members into the family, extending the family

table and allowing others to taste the love and warmth of the household of God.

That is, I suggest, the task that we have as a congregation, to become that nurturing place where the needs and challenges and celebrations can be lived out, and family relationships strengthened. It's one of the reasons that we are about to begin a search for a full-time associate pastor who will have working with families as a top priority. We care about families, and we want to show that care by providing a nurturing community for our young people.

If we will give ourselves to developing healthy family relationships within the community of faith, we can carry those relationships back into our homes where they can begin to transform and strengthen our relationships within the nuclear families of which we are a part. And then, it may be said of us, as Luke said of Jesus, that we are *growing in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and others*.