

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Dec 29th 2013

When I was a young wife and mother, I could never find the time to pray. Each day was so full and with each passing year our schedule as a family grew more demanding. How could I get the laundry done? How could I find time to pray?

I finally realized that no one ever came into the laundry room, and the peace of that room was the perfect place to pray. As I sorted laundry, I prayed for each person in my family while folding pajamas, school uniform blouses and an endless number of socks. My prayers and my spirituality were shaped in that laundry room, and I have always connected doing the family laundry with prayer.

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family, remembering how Jesus grew up in the normal busy-ness of family life, how he was shaped as a person by both Mary and Joseph.

Pope Francis wrote in his recent exhortation that the family is “where we learn to live with others despite our differences and to belong to one another.” That very belonging to each other is what today’s readings are about.

In the first reading, Sirach entreats parents and children to love and honor each other. When one generation can no longer care for the other, he calls us to “take care of your father when he is old ... even if his mind fails, be considerate of him.” He adds the care we give for the elderly “will not be forgotten, firmly planted against the debt” of our own failings.

Our lives are complicated and families don’t always consist of two parents. But Paul’s letter to the Colossians offers all of us the tools we need to care for each other: . I can guess that Paul was intimately connected with family as he notes other important family skills, like “bearing with one another” which seems like an apt phrase on the harder days. When we share a home, we not only have to forgive each other, but to be aware that we need forgiveness from each other, prompted by the example of God’s deeply loving forgiveness for us all.

The Gospel is Matthew’s story of the Holy Family fleeing to Egypt in fear of Herod, who was searching for their son. They left their homeland and lived in a country they did not know, with languages and customs not their own, separated from their family. When they could finally return to Israel, fear of Herod’s successor forced them to go not home, but to Galilee, where they would be less

likely to be found.

But despite the stress of their situation, I picture them as holding onto each other even more closely. That seems to be our human reaction to tragedy – we want to gather our loved ones together and hold onto each other. Even with the people who drive us crazy. But they are family and they belong to us and we belong to them; because family is not about perfection but fidelity. As Pope Francis says about families, “We remain steadfast in our intention to respect others, to heal wounds, to build bridges, to strengthen relationships and to ‘bear one another’s burdens.’”

He says when a parent speaks to a child, the parent “becomes small,” crouching down to eye level and speaking in a softer, different voice. He says, “Someone looking in from the outside might think, ‘This is ridiculous!’” and yet parents do it “because the love of a father and mother needs to be close.” He says God comes to us in the same “small” way of a parent, speaking to our fears with gentle love, “Don’t be afraid, don’t be afraid, I’m here.”

Being part of a family means being faithful to our everyday lives, to loving each other on our best and worst days, and to remembering the sacredness of even the pile of socks, overflowing in the laundry room.

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