

Homily for the Feast of the Holy Family, December 31, 2017

On Friday evening I gathered in Reno with my two brothers and cousins to celebrate the 50th wedding anniversary of my aunt and uncle. We had a wonderful cioppino dinner and I prayed a special blessing over them. They shook their heads and said, "I don't know how we got to 50 years." Someone at the table remarked, "One thing that is really wonderful about the two of you is that you seem to treat each other today the same as you did when you were first married." We all nodded. They treat each other, with "heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility gentleness and patience," the little litany we heard in the second reading. In short, they not only love each other deeply but they respect each other and do not take one another for granted. It is a beautiful witness they give to us through their marriage.

Family plays probably the biggest role in shaping us - the good of it and the bad of it. And generally the largest impact on us in the family dynamic is from our parents. We learn from a very early age whether we are loved and how we are loved most often through our parents first.

Unless they adopt a child who is a little older, parents don't get to choose who or how their child will be. Their personality, their looks, their interests - all will be revealed. Of course it is also true that children don't get to choose who their parents will be. Through our creation, God chooses. I think that makes the Scriptures we hear today all the more crucial for good family living. The call to respect father and mother also influences how we respect other people. Likewise, when parents respect their children they give them dignity and worth and teach them how it is we are to respect others outside the home. When that respect is lacking or when there is abuse in the home, deep wounds can form and, unless they do the work to heal them, people can carry around shame and anger for a long, long time. God has entrusted to the family the power to shape one another.

The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph gives us a powerful example to follow: Joseph's deep respect for Mary that, even before he understood God's plan, when Mary was found with a child not his own, he refused to subject her to public condemnation; Mary, trusting her husband enough to go with him into Egypt because he told her that their son was in danger; Jesus, obedient to his parents and advancing in wisdom.

This beautiful dynamic in the design of God begins with the presentation in the temple. Mary and Joseph bring their son to be consecrated to God, sharing their faith with him from the beginning and recognizing that the call to follow God's will is primary in our lives. I commend you who bring your children to mass with you week after week. I know sometimes it is a struggle

but it is a discipline that holy families embrace and it teaches there is a power greater than ourselves to which we are accountable and who loves us beyond telling. It is a teaching that will sometimes demand a lot from us. Simeon's words to Mary reminds us: "a sword will pierce your heart." That can happen when families live in the love of God.

In his adult life Jesus also teaches us that family is not contained solely in the relationship in which we grow up. Remember the story about when his mother and relatives come to see him when he is teaching and the people tell him your mother and your family are waiting to see you, he says: my mother and my family are those who "hear the word of God and act on it." That, of course, is supposed to be each and every one of us. It is what makes us, as Church, also family to one another. Each week we come to share our stories in the Scriptures and to share the meal of the Lord at his table.

As we go forth today, we heed St. Paul's words: "*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly ... and whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God through him.*"