

Holy Family Sunday  
December 27, 2009  
8 am Liturgy

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Here we are only two days after welcoming the infant Jesus in Bethlehem and he is already an adolescent. My, how time flies.

This was one of my sister's favorite gospel passages. It gave her great consolation. But it only struck her as significant as her own daughter was just entering adolescence herself. My sister was consoled, she said, that Mary and Joseph must have had the same experience any parents have when they try to raise a child through the teen-age years. It is for most parents puzzling—to say the least. It is often exasperating—in the extreme. And adolescence in a child usually ushers-in exhaustion in the parents.

In my sister's version the old adage about “misery liking company” comes to the fore. At least parents can know that they are not alone. So much for the overly pious “Holy Family” scenes we were taught as kids. All kids are trouble!

There is a marvelous 14<sup>th</sup> century painting created by a Sienna artist, Simone Martini, that depicts the scene well for parents all over the world and in all generations. The painting is called “Christ Returning to His Parents.” It shows Mary seated with one arm extended to her Son and with the most perplexed and almost pained look on her face. Her husband, Joseph, has both his arms extended

toward the heavens as he crooks his whole neck backwards to glare at his teen-aged Son. I can hear him saying: “Oy Veh!” And the scene is completed by the young Jesus slouching ever so gently with his arms folded tightly in front of him. One can practically hear the young boy saying (as only teen-aged boys can say):

“Mother...didn’t you know I had other stuff to do?”

We don’t think much about a teen-aged Jesus. The gospels tell us nothing except for this one incident. But he was “fully human” in all things save sin. That sounds like trouble for Mary and Joseph just like any other parents. All human relationships are complex, but none are quite as complex as those between parents and teen-agers.

And yet imagine all the things Jesus must have learned successfully from them—even as a teen-ager. We don’t think about that much either. But he must have learned how to laugh, when to cry. He learned how to pray and sing psalms. And when I think of families—old fashioned as I am (or just old as I am)—I think of dinner tables. (This is before Swanson’s and Birds Eye created TV frozen dinners—and all that has followed.)

Jesus must have learned early-on who had a place at their dinner table. It may have been one of the most important lessons he learned. He must have learned the faithfulness and the playfulness of the God who invited *all* as sons and daughters

to sit and eat. There's always a place at the table in the Holy Family. And we can credit that, most likely, to Joseph and Mary. He who simply trusted everybody so gently and so openly. And she who could sing so beautifully of important-looking people be toppled from their high horses and the lowly being raised to the head of the table. (That's Mary's Magnificat in case you missed the reference.)

What the Son learned at that table in Nazareth became the hallmark of his adult ministry. Much to the chagrin of the religious establishment, Jesus ate and drank with just about everybody. And, even more to the authority's dismay, Jesus proclaimed that the kingdom of his God always had a place at the table for the most unlikely of guests. Just jump ahead to his famous "Last Supper." A more motley crew of cowards and traitors and sheep could hardly be found. Yet they are all at the table—even Judas. And I bet it all started in Nazareth. If we only knew just how much Jesus learned at that dinner table!

So with my sister, be consoled at how complex human relationships can get for everybody—including the Holy Family. And celebrate with Mary and Joseph today that some things seem to have stuck—even with their teen-aged Son. Now all that's left to ask is: guess who's coming to dinner at your place? Will there be a place at the table there? Maybe that's what we need to learn—again and again.

Happy Holy Family Sunday!