

## ***What Makes a Family Holy?***

Homily for Holy Family Sunday 2020  
*Sirach 3:2-6, 12-14; Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 2:22, 39-40*

Most Reverend Joseph J. Tyson, Bishop of Yakima

Peace be with you! On this Holy Family Sunday how might we imitate their holiness? St. Paul has some advice he gives to the Colossian community. My favorite translation begins like this: "Clothe yourselves in heartfelt mercy..."

Mercy as you know is a key word for Pope Francis. "Miserando atque eligendo." That's the motto of Pope Francis. It is roughly translated "Having received mercy, therefore chosen." What is hard about this is in our daily language "mercy" is that it is a noun and not a verb. Like St. Paul who suggests the verb "clothe," Pope Francis wants us to know that mercy is an action.

What is this mercy? When God's love meets human sin, the fruit is always mercy. In our daily world we put justice and mercy together. Only those who err need mercy from the law. But following the line of St. Paul, Pope Francis would have us think differently. He puts together mercy with love. God is love. Pure and uncorrupted. "God has a name," noted the Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI, and that name is "love." "Deus Caritas Est" was the name of his first encyclical as Pope. "God is love." The definition of God is love. All love. Pure love. Only love.

But due to our sin on this side of the grave our most common experience of love will be mercy. Because of our sin we experience God's love as mercy. That is why when God's love meets human sin the fruit is always mercy.



Where does this experience most happen? In the family. "The family is the privileged setting where every person learns to give and receive love," notes Emeritus Pope Benedict. "The family is an intermediate institution between individuals and society and nothing can completely take its place.... The family is a necessary good for peoples, an indispensable foundation for society and a great and lifelong treasure for couples. It is a unique good for children who are meant to be the fruit of the love, of the total and generous self-giving of their parents.... The family is also a school that enables men and women to grow to the full measure of their humanity..."

Where do we see this sanctification of the family? Permit me to share with you a slice of my own ministry as priest and bishop. I am very good friends with Father Gary Zender. He is vicar for clergy in the Archdiocese of Seattle. Our paths crossed and our friendship started when we were both seminarians. Shortly after my ordination, Father Gary Zender's little brother Brian came to me. He was dating Paula. Paula was in one of the classes I was teaching in a ministry formation program. Paula and her family were also members of St. Louise parish in Bellevue where I served in my first assignment as a newly ordained priest.

Brian told me that they were planning to get married. They were hoping I would do their marriage preparation. But Brian also knew I was good friends with his brother. He did not want his brother or his large family to know about the wedding. Brian wanted to make sure he and Paula passed the pre-marriage exam. I told him it was not an exam but a survey to highlight similarities and differences in the couple and among their family. He seemed relieved. But he still did not want his brother to know until they had fully explored their relationship in marriage preparation. Needless to say, their marriage went off without a hitch. They went on to have two wonderful sons and a daughter.

This last summer their son, Drew, married Johnna, a woman whom, by coincidence, Father Gary Zender had baptized at St. Andrew in Sumner when he was pastor there. Because of COVID-19 the reception was cancelled. We had an outdoor dinner with just a very few immediate family members. Masks. Socially distant. Outdoors. It was very modest. It was not what anyone had expected. When we arrived outside Johnna's house, Johnna had lovingly decorated each table with pictures of family weddings going back over 100 years. Parents. Grandparents. Aunts. Uncles. Family who had clothed each other in heartfelt mercy. Family who had passed on the gift of faith from the first generation of German immigrants to their own wedding photo that day. Because of COVID-19 it was the simplest wedding dinner I had ever attended. It was also the most beautiful.

This Holy Family Sunday invites us to reflect: What picture of family will we want to leave the next generation? How do we clothe ourselves in heartfelt mercy, one for another? We live in a broken world. We live in a world broken by COVID-19. We live in a fallen world. We live in a world fallen due to the sin of poverty, war, strife, political tension. We live in a world broken by our lust, our greed, our seeking personal gain from another's misfortune. Yet we need not go any farther than our blood family to relearn the steps of love. We need not go farther than the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph to learn how to love in times of strife. May the Holy Family pray for us now in our time of need. Peace be with you.

Art: Bernhard Strigel, "The Holy Kinship," c. 1520. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons