

# Homily for the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph

December 30-31, 2017

Readings: Sirach 3:2-6; 12-14; Colossians 3:12-21; Luke 2:22-40

Preacher: Frank Staropoli

Holy Family Sunday has a nickname: Elbow Sunday.

You can see it happening particularly during the Colossians reading:

- “Wives, be subordinate to your husbands” (poke!)
- “Husbands love your wives and avoid any bitterness toward them (jab!)
- “Children, obey your parents” (my turn!)
- “Fathers, do not provoke your children” (back atcha!)

In the late '70s and early '80s my wife Sue and I were co-directors of the diocesan Family Life Office. We each brought an MA in Theology, but mainly what we brought was the experience of living life as a lay person. At the time, this was a unique perspective on Buffalo Road! Still is actually, huh?

We were invited to “preach” a few times a year at various parishes. We could often count on being at some parish for Holy Family Sunday. And the readings were ideal for opening up the experience of the ministry of the laity. We simply spoke about the holiness of ordinary life, citing all those passages in these readings that mirrored what most of us lay folk experienced day in and day out: caring for aging parents, decisions to forgive, and to ask for forgiveness, bearing with one another, motherhood, fatherhood, marriage, and on and on. We simply affirmed these “ordinary” moments as the essence of our baptismal call, as the sacred times of lay life, every bit as “holy” or “sacred” as a nun’s hospital visits or a priest’s sacramental ministry.

The response was inevitably a rapt attention, a kind of sitting up and hearing, as if what was being affirmed was NEWS!! GOOD NEWS!!

We could almost hear the questions:

- You mean what I’m doing every day is *ministry*?
- You mean I can stop feeling guilty because I’m not involved in several committees?
- You mean I’m serving by staying home and doing what I do?

- You mean this is the stuff of sainthood?
- You mean I didn't sell out when I chose not to enter the convent or the seminary?

You would think we were offering a radical, wholly new vision of holiness, of sacredness. I was stunned at times to recognize just how hungry people were for this affirmation of the true, deep meaning of their “heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience” (Colossians):

- Changing diapers became sacramental.
- Planning family meals was imbued with holiness.
- Biting one's tongue was a sacred act!

I would often tell my own “vocation” story: When I was in about 7<sup>th</sup> grade in a Catholic grammar school, one of the priests took me aside to ask me if I would consider becoming a priest. Now mind you, any boy with any redeeming social qualities whatsoever was asked this at some point. So I considered it. It didn't take me long to conclude that I was not holy enough nor was I good enough. And so I decided to *just get married*. That remark inevitably drew a gasp of recognition and sheepish chuckles. So many of us backed into lay life as a second choice. Rather than dedicate our lives totally to God (nuns and priests) we would *just* be lay people—single or married—lay people.

Today's readings are certainly among the most tangible, ostensible, relatable affirmations of the holiness of the ordinary. But with a fundamental conviction about the baptismal calling, *all* of scripture is heard as direct, explicit, descriptive, instructive lessons for how we move through our days—in our families, workplaces, neighborhoods and the world. Sadly, this connection is rarely made from the pulpit. The absence of lay preaching, the lay experience, the lay narrative, is surely a loss for the hungry souls in the pews.

Another piece of my personal vocation story: In the late '70s I was a member of the Permanent Diaconate Task Force, convened to design the P.D. program for the Diocese. We went at it hard for a year or so. When the program was announced and people (men) were invited to apply, there was an expectation that naturally I would apply.

I declined. I had recognized in the process and in the rich theological education I received at St. Bernard's that I am a lay person to the core. I had often spoken during the process of the importance of "screening" for men who would view the diaconate as another step "up," or who were making up for that initial reluctance to live a life totally committed to God.

And so with these precious readings today, I gratefully reaffirm my lay vocation, I thank God for the precious gift of seeing in this life the fullness of my calling, the richness of the ordinary, the challenge and the holiness of every waking moment.