

Homily for the Feast of the Holy Family

December 26-27, 2020

Readings: Genesis 15: 1-6; 21: 1-3; Hebrews 11:8, 11-12, 17-19; Luke 2: 22-40

Preacher: Frank Staropoli

Seamus and Dierdre O’Heaney were sitting in their usual pew at St. Malachy’s on Holy Family Sunday. Their eight children were arrayed, four on either side of them, placed in the order their parents deemed least likely to result in the kind of elbow-jabbing and pinching that would draw Father Riordan’s attention, followed by a critical glare.

He was in the pulpit now, extolling the endless virtues of the model parents, Mary and Joseph: Mary, the ever loving, kind, generous soul, never ruffled, never harsh. Joseph, the guiding father, teaching his son his trade, endlessly patient, ever affirming. Fr. Riordan seemed to embellish his descriptions more with each passing year. Finally, Dierdre had heard enough. She subtly leaned into Seamus and whispered, “Thim an’ their one!”

I believe I can relate more to Dierdre than to Mary and Joseph – at least in the way that Fr. Riordan describes them. I’m also daunted by the faith of Abraham and Sarah described in our other readings today. As a father, the only affirmation I could lay claim to in these readings has more to do with my children than with me: I can say that they “grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God is upon them.”

I doubt that I’m alone in the sense of inadequacy I’ve experienced as a father. And I’m thinking that Covid and our financial woes have weakened the spirits of many parents, caused anguish, self-doubts, fears, frustration. So many parents are facing extraordinary challenges to sanity and faith now:

- Job evaporation or insecurity
- Food insecurity
- Housing insecurity
- Too many people in too little space for too many hours
- Siblings whose nerves are frayed

- Children who are too young to understand these bizarre boundaries, and teens who are old enough to understand but not yet mature enough to adapt gracefully.

What would Mary and Joseph do?

I'm not sure that's an especially helpful question! Certainly not if we use Fr. Riordan's glowing descriptions of them as the measure.

Joseph and Mary are models, no doubt. And for those of you who, like me, find them a bit inaccessible, here's an alternative way to find our family bearings in these times:

Who are the people who have "parented" you along the way? Who are the real-life saints who mentored you, comforted you, taught you, shaped you into the beautiful soul you are today? Yes, those people. Whether your actual parents or a neighbor or teacher or coach, who are the ones who helped "raise" you in a deeply spiritual sense? Consider this as the litany of saints that have had impact in your life. Doubtful that any will be canonized. But what if you think about them as your holy family? What if they are the role models and mentors and "go to" people you connect with when you're looking for inspiration, for wisdom, for example?

If those saints are still with us today, go to them, draw again from that well of affection, of wisdom, of affirmation. Lay out those challenges you grapple with before them. Then listen.

If those saints have passed on, huddle with them in the still of early mornings, share a coffee or tea with them, check in with them as you close the day. I'm sure you'll find they're remarkably accessible!

And here's an added possibility: Let Seamus and Dierdre be part of that holy family. Let them be an inspiration!

Seamus, by the way, could not stop laughing after Dierdre's quip. Fr. Riordan shot them a withering glare. And the kids, catching a sense of their parents' delight, began to laugh up their sleeves too!

The rest of that Sunday at the O'Heaney home was full of lightness and peace. A holy family, indeed.