

Feast of the Holy Family, JMJ

December 29, 2024

I wonder what would happen if the story we just heard in the Gospel passage from St. Luke took place today. Can you imagine? In this era of social media? After all it's quite a story. I can see the headline now: Parents Go On Vacation, Head Home Without Kid! Twitter would probably just about self-destruct from the deluge of millions of people chiming in with their opinions. And my guess is, the vast majority of the comments would almost certainly be in condemnation of the parents, a kind of "public shaming". How irresponsible! How could that happen? What were they thinking? WERE they even thinking? It would be a feeding frenzy.

Many of us like playing the blame game. Correction - many of us like blaming others, we like pointing out their faults and shortcomings and what we consider to be "bad judgment". We do it all the time. We see the behavior of others, or see some situation that doesn't play out as we think it should and we quickly let our criticism be known. Of course, behind many of these comments is the notion that WE would NEVER act that way, or make those same decisions.

I would have never let my daughter go to that party. I would never let my son /daughter listen to that music, or dress like that, or use that sort of language. I would never...you fill it in.

It might sort of amuse us to imagine what we would have done had we had the exact same experience as Mary and Joseph. Would we panic? Probably. Would we be worried out of our minds? Almost certainly. Would we yell or cry or make excuses when we finally found our child? Would we just hug him. Probably all of the above.

Would we think we were at fault?

Maybe. Of course, the story of the Finding of Jesus in the Temple is not about assigning blame. That's really not the "point" of the story. And it's a story we only get to hear on Sunday once every three years. So that makes today sort of unique. Most of us are familiar with this story because of its place in our praying of the Rosary. It's one of the "mysteries". And not a "sorrowful" one. But a "joyful" one. And that should tell us something.

You see, we don't call this story "The Losing of Jesus", we call it the "Finding of Jesus". And while this story might have layered meanings that we could expand on, on its surface it's a story about a particular family not being complete until its son, Jesus, was back in the fold, in its midst, at its center. This family, this unique and remarkable family was made whole, made complete, made "holy" when the living God was embraced by it, nurtured by it, loved by it.

Simply put, something, or rather someone was missing and when found, brought joy to the hearts and souls and lives of those who had lost him. It might not be much more complicated than that. When Jesus came into that family and became the center of it, the family became "holy", became "complete" became the beautiful, loving, caring family God called it to be. Without Jesus, something was missing, something essential. With Jesus, well, it was a whole different story, for with him nothing was (or is) impossible.

Today, of course, we are celebrating the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. And while it's a day to take a close look at the Holy Family, to admire the Holy Family, and to give thanks to God for them and for their example, it's also a chance for us to look at our individual families. And not just in a superficial way, but to actually think about what can/should/will make our families holy.

What does it take?

This is where it gets tricky. This is where our hearts can be filled with a certain amount of sorrow and disappointment, because when we look at our families, we see all sorts of things. Most of us see a little bit of everything - good things and bad things, healthy relationships and harmful ones, kindness and criticism, compassion and judgment, it's all there for many of us. Some families are often just really, really messy. That will probably never change. And sometimes they simply don't look like anything we had hoped they would. Are they holy? Can they be holy?

One thing a "holy" family is not, is "perfect". God might invite us to perfection, but he knows that it's not possible, and that sometimes we will do the wrong thing, mess up, sin. No, holiness is not a kind of finished product, a "getting everything right". It's more about the direction we are heading, the things we value, and the degree to which we are willing to sacrifice and give of ourselves to be better than we were before. Holiness is kind of both what we strive for, and the journey on the way there, in other words, it's a process.

And so, maybe what made the Holy Family "holy" will make our families a little holier too. And the most challenging part of this task is that we can't focus on others to bring it about. We can't point fingers and assign blame and take the position that our families will only become more loving if other people get their act together or change or make better decisions.

No, each of us simply needs to do what Mary and Joseph did, make sure that we, ourselves, are not wandering off from Jesus. And if we are, we need to do all we can to run into his loving arms, hold him close, and make him the center of all we say and do once again. Our families will never be the beautiful things they can be, will never be loving, caring, compassionate realities, will never be "holy" unless God is embraced in the midst of all of it and allowed to change hearts and minds and attitudes and behaviors and the way we see each other.

It's a big task. But it's not ours alone. God is right in there with us, helping us at every step of the way. And so, let's stop pointing fingers, and

instead look within. Have I left God behind? Have I forgotten to keep him close, keep him within my sights? Have I stopped trying to forgive or be kind or be understanding?

I believe that every family can be made better. Let me say that again. Every family can be made better and holier. All relationships can be strengthened, even those that are badly wounded. Every single family can grow in mercy and generosity and love. But we'll never do it by trying to control others. We can't make people who we want them to be. That's not our task, nor is it even possible. The only things in our control are the choices we make, the love we choose to give or withhold. And that alone, those changes in even one person - you or me, can make our families a little better, a little stronger, a little more holy.

So let's keep Jesus close, and see what wonderful things he has in store for us and for our families. With God there are no dead-ends. Our families' best days can always be ahead. May we help make those better days a reality.

Thank you, Jesus, for helping us build holy families.

And Mary and Joseph, please pray for us, that our families may come to reflect the best in yours.