

Feast of the Holy Family
December 29, 2019
Dignity/Boston
Marianne Duddy-Burke

It is always an honor and profound responsibility to be invited by our Liturgy Committee to preside and/or preach for this community. On this occasion, when Jane asked which feast I'd like to focus on tonight, Holy Family or the Solemnity of Mary, there was no hesitation. The Holy Family, of course! What would be more natural for this spouse, mom, sister, caregiver queer theological activist? Our community has so much to add to the shamefully inadequate theology of family that our Church has developed over two millennia. Our experience parenting as LGBTQI people, whether those children were born to an opposite sex relationship and we had to come out or transition as parents, whether conceived in a same-sex partnership or marriage, whether adopted, fostered, or cared for when family members became incapable of parenting, there are insights and challenges that need to be added to the Scriptural array of family diversity. And each of us has our experience of being part of families that responded to our truths in a wide array of ways, some of which helped us blossom, and others that may have stunted, to some degree, our self-acceptance. We have stories of caregiving for those related to us by blood or law, and for dear friends for whom we assumed familial responsibility. We know the experience of a whole community becoming family, and many of us have known what it means to be family without legal or social support. All of this is part of the rich spiritual tradition we help to develop, and I assumed this is where I would dwell in this reflection.

However, as I sat with the readings, which I remember nearly word for word from the Holy Family Masses of my childhood parish and the dinnertime discussion of them that was our Sunday family tradition, I found myself responding to very different themes. I heard these readings in dialogue with each other, the first two representing two of the major strands of ecclesiology, or Church identity, that seem to struggle for the soul of Catholicism through the ages.

Our first reading, from the scribe Sirach, presents a model of family that is ordered and hierarchical. *NOTE: Check language of our readings:* "God sets a father in honor over his sons, a mother's authority God confirms over her children." The chain of command is literally divinely ordained, and those who obey authority are promised rewards including long life, a robust family, answered prayers, even the wiping away of sins. My sense is that many of us are familiar with this top-down, power-over way of ordering relationships that is often seen as "traditional." And it certainly extends beyond family, to social structures like the military, law enforcement, corporate life, government, and yes, the institutional Roman Catholic Church. I think that when we see the family referred to so often as "the first church" in our faith's documents, this is what the writers and teachers have in mind.

Our second reading, the excerpt from Paul's Letter to the Colossians, presents a very different model of relationship, tonight presented as advice to families. Paul tells us to engage one another with "heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another." Above all, he says, put on love, the bond of perfection. He says, "let the peace of Christ control your hearts...And be thankful." This is a very different model of engagement, much more

about mutuality, respect, equality, and humility. There is nothing about obedience or power in these words, at least in the section we are hearing. To be completely transparent, the Lectionary offers two options for this reading—what we heard and a longer version that continues with “wives, be subordinate to your husbands, etc.” that I’ve always found a jarring transition. We chose the briefer, more internally consistent selection. This reading illuminates the more pastorally oriented model of Church, one in which we are a community where each member of the body has a role and function, is necessary for the wholeness of the entirety, and no one individual or function has inherent priority. Admittedly, this version of community, family, church can be messy, takes more figuring out and is more variable than one where the lines of authority are clearly established, unquestioned and recognized by outsiders.

And finally, we come to our Gospel, Matthew’s familiar story of the flight into Egypt, where Jesus’ family become refugees due to the political threat against the child. As I sat with the Scriptures, I came to see this as the Scriptures’ final word on the models of family and by extension of church, of sacred community presented in the other readings. The Gospel shows how a hierarchy committed to self-preservation can see any instability, even the rumor of an infant’s birth, as justifying eradication of the perceived threat, and of anything and anyone associated with it. In this reading, God gives a command through the angelic messenger ordering Joseph to slip the bonds of authoritarianism. Joseph is clearly told that his and Mary’s job as parents is to protect the child, even at the cost of disrupting their entire lives, and living as exiles in a new land.

To me, this upends the notion of *power over* and sanctifies the command of *power for*. In the same way that Joseph and Mary see their primary responsibility as protecting the child Jesus, any power, resources, and talents we have is ordered to care for the weak and vulnerable. I believe this is what the feast of the Holy Family is meant to teach us, and where we find the hallmark of truly sacred spiritual community. For too many decades, we’ve seen this feast as giving instruction to families as to how they should behave, when in reality, this, like all liturgical feasts, has a message for the entire community. From long before Jesus’ public ministry, the Gospels tell our entire Church to live the preferential mandate for the poor.

The particular message for us, LGBTQI and Ally people of faith, is that as we, through the advocacy and witness of so many, find ourselves moving from the margins to the center of society and social structures, let us never forget others whose lives, identities, realities and cultures are threatened. Our mission for justice cannot end with those we see as part of our community, but extends to all humanity.