December 31, 2017
The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph

Sir 3:2-6, 12-14 Or Gn 15:1-6; 21:1-3
Col 3:12-21 Or Col 3:12-17 Or Heb 11:8, 11-12, 17-19
Lk 2:22-40 Or Lk 2:22, 39-40

By Dawn M. Nothwehr, OSF, Ph.D.

The Feast of The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph comes but a week after Christmas, and the last day of 2017. In this final celebration of 2017, we are called to emulate the virtuous life of the “First Family of Christianity.” Yet, for many the previous weeks of holiday celebrations have been illustrative not only of moments of truly virtuous loving and giving, but also for equally many, some extended moments of strife, quashed hopes, or even heinous domestic violence. While many look forward to New Year’s Eve Festivities – others face them with anxiety.

Beyond that, with today’s readings, there is the huge challenge of somehow spanning the gaps of time, technology, culture, and numerous other factors that tell us that “my family” and the “Holy Family” really don’t have that much in common. “It’s just too big of a stretch to think we’d ever come close to meeting the standard today’s readings evoke.” Just take for example the needs, obligations, or opportunities for children – “Would Jesus have come out so perfect, if he had to deal with the violence in my neighborhood?” And then there are parental expectations and family dynamics based on gender that are vastly more authoritarian and androcentric, and that tend to grate at our democratized and liberated hearts and minds.

Domestic Violence and Col 3:18 – Today’s Second Reading

But especially confounding – there is the glaringly troublesome section in the longer option for the Second Reading – Colossians 3:18 – “Wives, be subordinate to your husbands.” Anyone who has had a significant amount of pastoral counseling training will recognize that text as one of the most frequently cited biblical passages used by perpetrators to justify their violence against women. In fact back in 2000 the Irish Catholic Bishops Domestic Violence document recommended that Colossians 3:18, along with the following texts be deleted from the Lectionary: Ephesians 5:22-24; 1Timothy 2:11-15; 1 Corinthians 14:33-35; 1 Corinthians 11:3-16; Peter 3:1-6; and Titus 2: 4-5.

Notably, there is an option of the shortened version of the Second Reading, Col. 3:12-17 available in the Lectionary for this day. Certainly, the jarring reality of the lethal use of the longer version demands of the preacher an extraordinary amount of care and expert exegesis, if for any reason he chooses to utilize the longer reading. Given that is possible – with great diligence and care – this feast can be an occasion to offer the gift of healing to women and families fraught with domestic violence. There are numerous preaching resources available (See the Resources at the end of this reflection).

Practical Paths to Virtue

Having noted this reality, it is no doubt tempting for the preacher to wax eloquently to either extreme. On the one hand, to focus on the ideals posed as the way a Christian family “ought” to live together, or on the other hand, to elaborate on the many ways the family has broken down in our day. Yet, I dare say that the readings do present us with a via media that can be achieved. Beyond the fact of the abuse
wrought upon the Colossians text, the list of virtues called forth therein are quite wholesome. But it still remains – how to actively cultivate each virtue “compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, love or peace – move beyond the “To Do List.” There are several items circulating quite freely on the internet, with no specific attribution for the original authors being given, that would seem to offer some practical wisdom in support to the Holy Wisdom found in today’s readings (See below).

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Further Resources
In God’s providence, my own parents – indeed most of the world’s parents are good. It is truly a gift to have had such exemplars. Perhaps the greatest lesson my parents gave me – their rather independent daughter – was the knowledge that the world is One Family and God is a loving Parent, ever present, with open arms to support and – when we falter – to receive us back.

“And let the peace of Christ control your hearts, the peace into which you were also called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as in all wisdom you teach and admonish one another, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. [Col.3: 15-17]

If Children Live With . . . .

. . . criticism, They learn to condemn.
. . . hostility, They learn to fight.
. . . with ridicule, They learn to be shy.
. . . shame, They learn to feel guilty
. . . tolerance, They learn to be patient.
. . . encouragement, They learn confidence.
. . . praise, They learn to appreciate.
. . . fairness, They learn justice.
. . . security, They learn to have faith.
. . . approval, They learn to like themselves.
. . . acceptance and friendship, They learn to find love in the world.

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence: Forgiveness
Two friends were walking through the desert. During some point of the journey, they had an argument; and one friend slapped the other one in the face. The one who got slapped was hurt, but without saying anything, wrote in the sand: “Today my best friend slapped me in the face.”
They kept on walking, until they found an oasis, where they decided to take a bath. The one who had been slapped got stuck in the mire and started drowning, but the friend saved him. After he recovered from the near drowning, he wrote on a stone: “Today my best friend saved my life.” The friend who had slapped and saved his best friend asked him, “after I hurt you, you wrote in the sand and now, you write on a stone, why?” The friend replied “when someone hurts us we should write it down in sand where winds of forgiveness can erase it away. But, when someone does something good for us, we must engrave it in stone where no wind can ever erase it.”

**God Waiting for Us as a Father**

The boy walked along the ocean shore . . . trying not to stray. He looked up to his father saying, “Dad, I want to play.”

His father looked upon him, with love showing in his eyes.

“He would never leave you Daddy, I love you way too much.”

But the boy took a step away, out of his father’s range of touch.

He walked through the surf, the waves tickling one toe.

“If I take one more step in . . .” he thought, “Father will never know.”

His father called out to him, “Son, remain close to me!”

The boy thought . . . “At the moment I don’t need you!”

His father felt a sadness, but he held his tongue.

Sometimes lessons need to be learned . . . even when so young.

The boy stepped out a little further . . . the water covering his waist.

His father spoke with urgency . . . “My son, come back to me,” he said, “The day is almost done!”

“Not yet, Dad,” the boy yelled, “I’m having fun!”

The boy did not have his father’s insight . . . so he could not yet tell, the tide was coming in fast . . . there would be no time to yell.

“Father!” he tried to scream, as the water covered his head.

“I need you now, Daddy!” was what the boy had said.

And in a single instant his father was by his side.

“I thought you left me, Daddy . . . I thought you went to hide.”

The father looked upon his son . . . a tear streaming down his cheek.

The boy looked upon his father . . . and cried the sobs of the meek.

“I would never leave you son . . . for I love you just the same.”

“I was only waiting . . . for you to call upon my name.”

**Resources On Domestic Violence**

**When I Call for Help – US Bishops Pastoral on Domestic Violence**

- Gives some basic definitions and reasons why Domestic Violence happens and continues.
- Lists scripture passages used by abuser or victim to justify their actions.
- Clearly states “No person is expected to say in an abusive marriage.”
- Acknowledges that women believe they must stay in abusive marriages but does not mention the role of priests or deacons in preaching distorted messages that lead to this perception.
• It’s a good first step, and something that can be referred to, but there are more comprehensive resources available to build up from here.
• The USCCB has some good resources

The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV) - www.ncadv.org
✓ 1 in 3 women and 1 in 4 men in the United States have experienced some form of physical violence by an intimate partner.
✓ On a typical day, domestic violence hotlines receive approximately 21,000 calls, on average close to 15 calls every minute.
✓ 72% of all murder-suicides involve an intimate partner; 94% of the victims of these crimes are females.

Professional Reading

In this article, Ramsay highlights Biblical Themes and their Distortions:
• Suffering – Ministers need to differentiate between suffering that arises as a consequence of sin from suffering that is undeserved. (32)
• Hope – Hope implies a sense of agency ...experiences of domination seriously undermine any adequate sense of agency. Hope as resistance is important in the steps to healing for a survivor. (33)
• Love – It is important to differentiate between Jesus’ voluntary self-sacrifice and their oppression. (34)
• Covenant Language for marriage describes a context of love and honor or cherishing the other. This redefinition allows for the understanding that the spouse who abuses their partner is the one who breaks the covenant.

Distortions of Forgiveness:
• Forgiveness and repentance – Survivors are often encouraged to forgive. Forgiveness as an obligation avoids any necessity for attending to accountability for change.
• Presumes that forgiveness is an isolated, singular act rather than a larger process for accountability and justice.
• Makes the victim of violence responsible for healing the family
• Avoids any attention to the imbalance of power that violence discloses
• Suggests forgiveness wipes the slate of memory clean

The Department of Domestic Violence Outreach Archdiocese of Chicago
This is a comprehensive interactive resource with videos, articles and training resources. I have highlighted three pieces here:

✓ The interactive resource manual:
Responding to Domestic Violence an Interfaith Guide to Prevention and Intervention:
https://pvm.archchicago.org/documents/87254/88701/1.1.1.+Responding+to+Domestic+Violence+An+Interfaith+Guide.pdf/7e77446e-efc6-43dc-b151-649a7548580d

The Do’s and Don’ts with a Battered Woman by the Faith Life Institute: