

Homily for December 27, 2009 (Feast of the Holy Family)  
*Sirach 3:2-6, 12-14; Psalm 128:1-5; Colossians 3:12-21; Luke 2:41-52*

Worried about something? I mean, *really* worried? If so, you're not alone. It's estimated that one in every six American adults suffers from some form of anxiety disorder. We spend nearly \$23 billion a year on medications, counseling, and hospitalizations to treat our anxieties when they become too much for us.

Lord knows, beyond the individual challenges we face in our own lives and in our families there's lots of other stuff to be worried about these days: wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and many other places; the threat of terrorism; global warming; violence in our streets; health care reform; and lingering unemployment...just to name a few!

Beyond that, we seem to have created a new industry to help stoke our fears: 24-hour cable news networks! I don't know about you, but I can't watch CNN, HLN, FOX, or CNBC very long without feeling my blood pressure and anxiety levels rise. There must not be enough news that's really *news* or they don't have enough time or money to cover other important matters because they tend to stay on the same stories on and on and on....It's exhausting!

The worst stories are those involving missing children. It's torture to watch the cable news personalities interview the anguished parents and grandparents, police, and others. It's not only so because it's so repetitive and graphic but even more because it feeds into what has to be one of the worst fears imaginable: a child disappearing and the parents having no idea where they are and whether they are alive and dead.

Just imagine what Nancy Grace would do with Mary and Joseph in today's gospel! With Jesus gone for three days the media would be in a state of frenzy, and the Temple in Jerusalem would be surrounded by sound trucks and satellite dishes.

Yet there's something comforting, too, in the story we just heard. The Holy Family was also a very *human* family; and that's Good News for us! This story reveals to us that in many respects, Jesus, Mary and Joseph were just like our own families:

- Kids aren't always where they're supposed to be or where their parents assume they are;
- Parents don't understand their kids;
- Kids don't understand their parents;
- Things happen that we don't understand until years later; and
- Despite all of this, the kids turn out pretty well.

The Feast of the Holy Family can leave many of us feeling a little ambivalent. On one hand, it's hard not to be inspired by the image of Jesus, his mother and his earthly father, especially so soon after Christmas. On the other, we can also find ourselves feeling a bit inadequate when we compare our families with theirs, and perhaps even more so in the midst of the holidays when we experience not only what's wonderful in our own families but also what's painful and dysfunctional.

That's where we often make a mistake! The Church has given us this feast not as a ruler but rather as an icon. We are to look at Jesus, Mary and Joseph not as a family against which we must measure our own but rather as an image through which we can experience and be transformed by God's own love and grace.

How can we and our families grow in that love and grace? This passage from Luke 2:41-52 suggests several ways.

We grow through the regular practice of our faith. The gospel notes that, "*Each year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover, and when he was twelve years old they went up according to the custom.*" Similarly, we and our families are called to join each Sunday in the community's celebration of the Eucharist—our new Passover in which we remember and recommit ourselves to living out the freedom that God has given us in Christ Jesus—and to make the other customs and rituals of our faith (meal prayers, Scripture reading, reception of the sacraments, etc.) part of the "domestic church," i.e., our own homes.

We grow by working through our times of conflict and confusion. When Jesus asked his parents, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" Luke notes that "they did not understand what he said to them." However, he later adds that "his mother kept all these things in her heart." The other time Luke used that phrase was to describe Mary right after his birth (2:19). Sometimes things happen in our families that are impossible to understand. It takes time, prayer and discernment to sort things out.

We grow by allowing time and experience to do their work. Even though Jesus was disobedient to Mary and Joseph in this instance, he was obedient to his heavenly Father. Further, Luke records that after their trip to the Temple, "He (Jesus) went down with them to Nazareth, and was obedient to them."

The Holy Family wasn't the Perfect Family. But they weren't asked to be; and neither are we. During this season when we both celebrate the gift of family and sometimes mourn its shortcomings, may we remember that and recommit ourselves and our families to grow in holiness and love. +