

## Feast of the Holy Family – December 27, 2015

Nobody's family can hang out the sign, "Nothing the Matter Here." Every family has problems. Nobody's family is perfect. So if Suzy down the street – the one with "Proud of My A+ Future Harvard Student" bumper sticker – would have you believe that it is only your family that defines troubles, have none of it. And if you happen upon a home with a sign that says "Nothing the Matter Here," be assured that something really is the matter – someone who lives there is in denial.

But what about the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph? Don't we celebrate a yearly feast to honor the one family who got it right? After all, think about what we know. Two of the three never sinned. There was no sibling rivalry. This family seemingly had it made.

Yet Scripture tells us that even the Holy Family would not have claimed there was "Nothing the matter here." The Holy Family's struggles are unmistakably present in the three-year cycle of Gospels for this feast. One year we hear about the family fleeing from Herod into Egypt. Another year we hear about the parents presenting Jesus to God in the temple, along with Simeon's terrifying words to Mary: "This child is to be a sign that will be contradicted – and you yourself a sword will pierce."

This year we hear of the Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem when Jesus was 12 years old. This gospel episode is a direct hit on the world of family life in at least two ways. The first and most terrifying is the lost child, the nightmare scenario of parents. This is not a "home alone" movie, where a child is left behind in familiar territory. This is a village child missing in a large city, among throngs of people who are coming and going. We sense Mary's great anxiety because she expresses it. Joseph has kept Jesus safe until the age of 12. Has all that protective vigilance come to naught? Will he lose him in a crowd after saving him from King Herod?

The second direct hit on the world of family life is the emerging adulthood of Jesus. Jesus here is not a toddler who has wandered off. In the culture of his day, he is a young man following his own lights. The gospel assures us that after this incident he returns home and is obedient to his parents. But still a new moment has been reached. Every parent knows this tension between holding on and letting go. The adolescent is sure adulthood has arrived and he or she is ready for "prime time." The parents are sure childhood is still lingering and get ready for their "not yet" speech.

This Gospel reminds us that life in the Holy Family was as real as true holiness must always be. Last January, Pope Francis spoke about family life and said, "Sometimes the plates will fly, but after the storm has passed, things have to be worked out." Today's gospel doesn't have flying plates, but evidently this family too was called to practice the virtues St. Paul recommends in today's second reading from Colossians. With Jesus, Mary and Joseph moved forward with far more faith than knowledge. Knowing Jesus, truly finding him, was a process that would last a lifetime. We celebrate the Holy Family, not because we're called to be holy card images, but because we are called to be real-life seekers and finders of the love for which we were created.