

When I was a kid I learned the definition of a sweater: A sweater is a garment that a child wears when its mother feels cold. When I see kids out in t-shirts on a day like this, I want to tell them, “You know, they sell coats your size; I’ve seen them in stores.” But I also realize that kids feel the weather differently than other people do. Parents and kids get into many an argument over clothing – how much of it to wear, how much of it to own, and what style is appropriate. All this happens because of deeply held principles – a child’s desire to fit in with peers, and a parent’s desire to protect the child from harm. A lot of arguments that happen in families are virtuous: they happen because of strongly held though opposing beliefs of what is the right thing to do.

Now, I’m single. I live alone. What do I know about family life? When I get into arguments at home, it’s with myself. The nice thing is I always win.

But it’s Holy Family Sunday. Right after we celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Church invites us to look at his childhood family as the model for our households. Jesus, Mary and Joseph had disagreements, but they loved one another. They were virtuous.

Virtues for family life are outlined in today’s second reading, a passage from Paul’s Letter to the Colossians. Paul is describing the ideal family life, but also the ideal life for the Christian community. These groups overlapped. Many of the first converts were baptized as families, and people like the Colossians were probably related to one another. Around here, you know how this goes. No matter what pew you’re in, you’re probably sitting with someone related to someone else at church, and if you’re not, just sit there a few more minutes. The virtues we need for family life are also the virtues we need for parish life, and for life in our city, schools and places of work.

What are those virtues? Paul offers this list: heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, and forgiveness. These are self-explanatory, but Paul spills a little more ink to describe forgiveness, as if we need to give it more attention. He calls it “bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you,” Paul continues, “so must you also do.” Paul must have been familiar with that line from the Lord’s Prayer, which also uses a few extra words to explain the importance of forgiveness.

Paul compares all these virtues to clothing. You should wear them. In winter, one t-shirt doesn’t keep you as warm as several layers of clothing do. The Christian life is this way. We need layers of virtue to pull it off. “Over all these” virtues, Paul says, “put on love” – the last garment, like a good sweater. It holds the other garments in place. When you have these virtues, the peace of Christ controls your hearts, and you will be thankful.

Even in our closest relationships there will be arguments, but if we wear our virtues like layers of clothing, and wear love like a sweater, the peace of Christ will keep us warm.