

In this parish I've seen families do some remarkable things. They babysit newborns. Parents promote education by reading and pursuing advanced degrees themselves. Families visit nursing homes together or help at soup kitchens. They vacation together to enjoy their own company. At the end of a member's life, they gather bedside to pray, cry, and hold hands. Not all families are so blessed, but many are.

The Feast of the Holy Family paints an idealized portrait of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. I'm sure on the whole they deserve that extraordinary recognition as the model family. But they had their struggles too. The parents lost Jesus in his childhood. Joseph disappears from the gospels once Jesus is an adult. The extended family appears too common to produce anything exceptional and too judgmental to support Jesus' mission. Although Luke says John the Baptist was related to Jesus at his birth, no other gospel story about John says the same thing. At the end of Jesus' life, only one family member remains at the cross, and that is Mary, his mother. Happily for us, the gospels do not romanticize Jesus' family, as if to reassure faulty families in their faith.

Nonetheless, the family remains the first model of Christian discipleship. Community life is key to Christian life. A parish community will find its source in the family. For those of you in non-traditional families and households, you need not despair. Just look to the priest who leads the typical Catholic parish, and see that even those who are not parents in traditional households can still have a place in the Catholic community. But, the value our church places on the family cannot be overstated.

For this Feast of the Holy Family, our lectionary offers a passage from the First Letter of John. It presents a theme repeated throughout the New Testament, the importance of love. This text blends faith, love, and prayer. If we believe in Jesus and love one another we will keep God's commandments. If we keep God's commandments, we will receive from God whatever we ask -- probably because we will not then ask for things that aren't good for us. On today's feast, this reading implies that the love modeled in the holy family should inspire the Christian family, and that love should appear in the church family.

And I see it here. I want you all to know that. In the new year, Christian families can renew their dedication to prayer, education, and service. Pray at home. Pray before meals, say the rosary, or use a good book like the one called *Catholic Household Blessings and Prayers*. Value education. Support children in Catholic schools and in religious education. Model learning by reading the diocesan newspaper and attending church sessions for adults. And serve. Go as a family to volunteer your time and talent wherever it can be used. Prayer, education, and service will support a family's love, and that love will lift the whole Christian community.