

A certain Baptist congregation was having a special service for children one Sunday. Their theme was family, and they wanted the children to see how extensive different families in the congregation were. The minister gathered all the children together in the sanctuary and gave them this instruction: "Go into the congregation, find an old person, and bring him or her back here with you here." One of the kids asked, "How do we know who is old?" That question is one reason why I would never do this exercise because the minister had to respond in stereotypes: people with gray hair, and so forth. Nonetheless it was still embarrassing to many just whom the children chose to represent their idea of old people.

When they were all back in the sanctuary, the minister went from one person to the next and invited the members of that person's family to stand so the children could see the different families represented. Some people belonged to more than one, some families were quite large, others very small. Finally he came to an elderly woman named Anna. "Would the members of Anna's family please stand?" No one stood. Anna was a widow, she had no children, her parents long dead. Anna bowed her head. It was a tense few moments in the church until finally one couple stood up. And then another, and then another, until the entire congregation stood on its feet in loving tribute to their friend. "We are your family, Anna," their hearts cried out.

The loneliness of old age is an enemy of family life. Our ideals of the family are so high we cannot tolerate loneliness, poverty, sadness, rivalry, or infidelity. And yet are families are rife with them. Failure on our part? Not necessarily, finding the perfect family would be like finding the end of the rainbow. It's hard to remain committed, it's hard being nice to people you live with all the time.

Still, the family remains the cornerstone of society and a nucleus of the Church. It's in the family where we learn about relating to other people, in the family where we learn about loving one another.

It's a snide question Jesus hears from the Pharisees today, it's so snide they had to get a lawyer to ask it. Apparently a priest wasn't available. "What's the greatest of the commandments?" Not the greatest of the ten commandments, the greatest of all 613 in the Torah, one for every bone in the human body. The implication is we can't keep them all, there are too many. Jesus gives two: love God and love your neighbor. Not be infatuated with your neighbor, not be nice to your family till the charm wears off, but love. When you learn someone's imperfections, don't live in criticism of them, live in love. It's a familiar Gospel, we've heard it a thousand times. But we need to hear it time and again because it's so hard to do. Families are messy, and it's hard to love them sometimes. So we listen to Jesus, and we keep striving for the ideal to build up our families strong in selfless love.