

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Well, here we are on the eve of New Year's Eve. Many of you, I suppose are looking forward to New Year's Eve parties tomorrow night. I've come to appreciate what one writer said: "Youth is when you're allowed to stay up on New Year's Eve; Middle age is when you're forced to; and Seniors say, "The hell with it", and go to bed.

But many of you will stay up late, watching the festivities on T.V. I like what one comedian said about that. He said, "I love it when they drop the ball in Times Square. It's a nice reminder of what I did all year."

Well, I've dropped the ball a few times myself this past year. But Monday begins a new year, a time for a new beginning. So, tonight is a great time to ask God to wipe the slate clean on our failures and our sinfulness, and ask him for his grace for the year that is arriving.

Just for a minute, let's take a walk back in time when we all read the old *PEANUTS* comic strip. Lucy is walking with Charlie Brown and Charlie asks her, "Lucy, are you going to make any New Year's resolutions?"

Lucy hollers back at him, knocking him off his feet: "What? What for? What's wrong with me now? I like myself the way I am? Why should I change? What in the world is the matter with you, Charlie Brown? I'm all right the way I am! I don't have to improve. How could I improve? How, I ask you? How"?"

Well, I've known quite a few Lucys in my time, and, I suspect, in certain areas of our lives, there's a little bit of Lucy in all of us.

Since tonight we are celebrating the Feast of the Holy Family, I thought it might be appropriate to consider how we might change the dynamics of our family life to make them a little bit more holy.

First of all, the families that the Scriptures offer us tonight, when you pay attention to their external realities, are not the best examples of holiness. In fact, on the face of them, they are seriously dysfunctional families.

Abram takes his wife Sarah from their home seemingly on a whim; goes to Egypt and tells Sarah to pretend to be his sister because she is so beautiful and he's afraid the Egyptians will kill him for her. So he allows the Egyptians to take Sarah to the Pharaoh who takes her into his home and God has to intervene with a plague on Pharaoh so that he'll send Sarah back to Abram. Eventually, they settle down and try to start a family, but Sarah seems unable to have a child. So, she tells Abram to take her servant, Hagar, who eventually bears a son, Ishmael, for Abram. Well beyond her child-bearing years, Sarah becomes pregnant, and bears Abram a son, Isaac. But, now, that she has a child of her

own, Sarah gets jealous and tells Abram that Hagar and Ishmael have to go. So, Abram sends them off into the desert to presumably die. Then, of course, we remember that Abraham is ready to sacrifice his beloved Isaac because he thinks that this will please God. Where is the holiness to be found in this dysfunctional family?

Then, there's Joseph, Mary, and Jesus. Mary was an unmarried, pregnant teenager; Joseph, an experienced carpenter, to whom Mary was promised in marriage. He finds out that she is pregnant and he knows that he had nothing to do with it. He's ready to be done with her. She runs off to her cousin, Elizabeth. But, Joseph is a dreamer. He has a dream where an angel tells him to take Mary as his wife and so he does. But, then, while she is pregnant they have to go to Bethlehem, a couple of days journey from their home, to register themselves with the Roman occupiers of their land. They're poor; they have no money; there's no place to stay; she's having contractions; they wind up in a stable, where the baby is born.

Now, the story of their little family is picked up in today's Gospel, where they apparently went home from Bethlehem, but then "they took him up to Jerusalem" to satisfy the ritual law of purification. By then, the baby, Jesus, was about a month old.

It was some time after that the Wise Men came from the East, inquiring after the new-born king of the Jews. They were told to go to Bethlehem, where they would find the child, so, perhaps, after the purification in Jerusalem, the family returned to Bethlehem, which is only about eight miles from Jerusalem. After that, Joseph again had a dream and was told to take the child and his mother and run for their lives since Herod's intent was to kill Jesus. So, off they went to live as refugees in Egypt where they had no family; they didn't know the language; and the customs, even the foods, were foreign to them. After some time, maybe as long as eight or ten years, they eventually came home and settled down in Nazareth. Where is the holiness to be found in this dysfunctional family?

Both Sarah and Abraham and Mary and Joseph appear in the Scriptures as seriously flawed human beings. Though they are at times courageous and caring; strong and selfless; they also appear to be weak and fearful; petty and impetuous. However, what seems common in both relationships and what they share with each other is faith in God and faith in each other. There is an abiding trust that somehow or another God will make a way where there is no way. They hold tightly to each other and support one another in that abiding faith. Both couples also seem to recognize that the purpose of their lives as individuals, as well as couples is to serve God. They see themselves as God's servants. That is what makes them holy.

Abraham and Sarah and Mary and Joseph and their children who are destined for greatness have to overcome all kinds of catastrophes, trials, and tribulations. They have to suffer much and often had to have felt lost and all alone. What gave them strength and

courage to muddle through the best way they could was to be faithful to the God whom they believed was faithful to them, as they sought to serve him the best they could.

If you want your family life to become holy, the models of Sarah and Abraham and Mary and Joseph might be a great place to start—have faith in God and faith in each other, and recognize that the very purpose of your lives is to serve the God who is ever faithful to you.

You might say, Father, that’s easier said than done. How do we get there? Well, an old celibate like me, St. Paul offers us in our alternate reading for tonight in his letter to the Colossians a great prescription in how to get there:

“Brothers and Sisters, put on, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another. If one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do. And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection. And let the peace of Christ control your hearts, the peace into which you were also called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as in all wisdom you teach and admonish one another, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, tonight I humbly recommend for your consideration that you make this your New Year’s Resolution—to become a truly holy family. Holiness in your family is as attainable as it was for Abraham and Sarah, Joseph and Mary, simply maintain an abiding trust in God and in each other, knowing that God is in it, whatever it is, with you, and He will make a way where there is no way. **HAPPY NEW YEAR!**