

ACTS 11:1-18 (p. 893)

MAY 15, 2022

JOHN 13:31-35 (p. 875)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Bless us with your Presence Lord, because today we are looking for a Word spoken directly to our lives. Empower us with your Holy Spirit Lord, because today we wish to know your will, and to boldly apply it to our lives. Awaken in us Father the true knowledge of your Son, because today we long to sense your limitless love, and then share it with a troubled world. We ask these things in His Name, Amen.

“FAMILY VALUES”

Jesus is talking about legacy here in today’s reading, passing on family values. He has just shared the Passover with His Disciples, their Last Supper together. He has predicted Judas’ betrayal, and is about to predict Peter’s denial. Jesus has been talking quite plainly about what is going to happen, and promises that the Holy Spirit will help see them through. And He says, “As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By doing this, everyone will know that you are my Disciples.”

“That’s what we do in this family, He says, in essence, “we love one another.” In fact, that is one of the distinguishing marks of our legacy. Believe me, people will notice if you do. They will be able to tell right away if you are living out our family values or not. And they will either be drawn to the family, or repulsed by it, based on how you act. Like I said, Jesus is handing on Family Values.

So, I've been thinking about that this week. I mean, how could I not? Mother's Day was just a week ago. My son and daughter-in-law just had their twelfth anniversary, and several grandkids and siblings have had birthdays. We've had more than a few funerals lately, and there are a couple of weddings just around the corner. Add into that, all that's currently happening in our Country, and in our world, not to mention in the Church throughout that world, and well, let's just say I've been thinking about values lately, or the lack thereof!

How do you define them, for instance? What do you base them on? How do you share them? How do you pass them on? How do you make sure that the next generation "gets it", particularly with all of the competing voices clamoring for their attention? How do you "show", and not just "tell". I think that's important, especially when it come to Love? I mean, Jesus knelt down and washed His Disciples feet, right! And said, "As I have loved you, so you must love one another. Because that's how people will know you belong to me!"

So, how would you model Family Values? How would you demonstrate what a loving relationship is actually like? I had to ask myself that question twelve years ago, when my son and daughter-in-law were married. I mean, a wedding is a "sendoff", right? Like closing one chapter and opening the next. What a great time to talk about what's important! And they asked me to write a Homily for the ceremony, so I thought, here's my chance! But how?

Brady and Jenny are both Engineers. They both went to school in the Upper Peninsula, at Michigan Tech, just north of the Porcupine Mountains. So, after agonizing for a while, I thought, I know, I'll talk about Porcupines, and the Second Law of Thermodynamics! I saw you roll your eyes! But hang in there, it makes sense. In a nutshell, the Second Law of Thermodynamics states that any "closed system" tends to move towards greater and greater randomness and chaos! Unless you apply energy, things will go downhill fast! You can probably imagine where I went with that!

Which brought me to the Porcupines, which I think dovetails nicely with Jesus' lesson today, so I brought a friend with me, the same friend I took to the wedding, to help make my point. "To Show", and not just "To Tell".

Porcupines are kind of cute and cuddly looking, aren't they, especially when they are young. And Porcupines are loyal! They choose a mate carefully. And always mate for life! At the wedding, I mentioned how both parents take an active role in raising their young. I even pointed out how they usually have three or four offspring, called "Porcupettes", just to put in a little hint for future grand babies! But the important part of the metaphor, the part that relates to today's Scripture and the Church, as well as to married couples, and relationships in general, is how Porcupines demonstrate love! I mean, if we are going to love one another, then we had better know how to do it, right!

Well according to The National Geographic Society, Porcupines can be "the prickliest of rodents". Their Latin name literally means "one who rises up in anger".

The average Porcupine has somewhere in the neighborhood of 30,000 quills, which they raise whenever they feel threatened! Imagine, thirty-thousand potential wounds! Maybe by accident? Maybe from a simple miscommunication?

These little “quill pigs”, without so much as a second thought, will assume a defensive stance if threatened. They will tip their heads down, and lower their shoulders. Their tails will start thrashing back and forth, and they’ll begin to “backing into” the threat, with every quill raised! Can you visual anything like that with people? Maybe in the Church?

A Porcupine prick can be a painful thing! Even if unintentional. But imagine the “emotional hurt” if the threat wasn’t real! No, in order for Porcupines to be close with one another, they really have to pay attention to what they are doing! They have to “intentionally lay down their quills”, even when they feel threatened! If they don’t, and one Porcupine accidentally pricks another, they tend to move apart. And once they are apart, they tend to stay apart. It’s only when they get cold, or loneliness sets in, or sometimes with fear, that Porcupines begin to cuddle together again! But if one of those pesky quills stands back up, the vicious cycle repeats!

Imagine how silly that looks to the other animals in the forest! Imagine watching that interaction from the outside! Imagine witnessing that type of behavior, and then, being asked, if you want to be a Porcupine? “Love one another, as I have loved you. By this, everyone will know that you are my Disciples.”

Jesus is giving His Disciples a sendoff. One chapter of their journey together is closing, and the next is about to open up. So, He is preparing them to be on their own, to start off their life together as the Church. It's the night before His Crucifixion, and they are all in the Upper room, sharing a last meal. It's Passover, a very festive time, a time of thanksgiving. The focus is on God, and how He redeems His people from slavery and bondage!

But it's a time of sadness too, of impending loss. Jesus is heading to the Cross. So, Jesus gathers His adopted family. Washes their feet as an example of serving one another, caring for one another, in complete and ultimate ways! And then, He shares some last-minute advice. "Love One Another", He says. "As I have loved you, so you must love one another."

Only it's not just advice. This isn't a mere suggestion, or a proposal, or even a wish. Jesus is not offering a recommendation. In verse fifteen, pointing to the Foot Washing, He says, "I have given you an example"! And now, in verse thirty-four, He says, I am giving you a "Commandment", a "new Commandment"! "Love one another, because that's how everyone will know you belong to Me!"

Did you know that Maundy Thursday of Holy Week is based on this text? And by extension, so is Communion. The word "Maundy" comes from the Latin word for "Mandate". On the night before He was betrayed, arrested, beaten, and Crucified, Jesus gave those who would follow Him a new Mandate! "Love one another"!

In other words, intentionally lay down your quills! Take care of each other! Do for each other! Serve each other! Wash each other's feet, like I just did for you! When I am gone, help one another! Watch over each other! Do the hard things for, and with, each other! Teach one another! Pick each other up when you stumble! Come together in times of trouble, and times of celebration, and all the times in between! Be there for one another! "Just as I have loved you, now you must also love one another!" Lay down your quills! Do it on purpose!

And again, it's not a suggestion! It's a command, like Moses' Big Ten! And this one comes directly from the Lord Himself! You **MUST** love one another! It's an imperative in the Greek! You have got to do this! But it is also an indicative, as well. Because "by doing this", you will witness to the world that you really are my Followers!

If you love each other, people will know that you are my Disciples. If you care for your fellow Believers, everyone outside of the Church will know that you are a part of it. If you pour out compassion and forgiveness and mercy on your Brothers and Sisters in Christ, everyone will know what Family you belong to! And by extension, what your Family Values are!

Oh, I know it's not a perfect Family! There is no such thing! Every Family has issues! Trust me! Just look around! Jesus is clear on that too! But if we continue to love each other, no matter what, the neighbors will see the kind of Family we really are, and want to be a part of it! That's "Evangelism 101"!

You do realize that the New Testament was written for the Church, right? And for all those who would one day become the Church. And throughout its pages you'll find lots of language reflective of Family. We are Born Again, Adopted, Heirs, given an Inheritance. We are Brothers and Sisters of Christ, who spend time together under one-roof.

We have some older siblings who have been in the house a little longer than others, like the original Jewish Christians in and around Jerusalem. And also, some younger siblings, who have just joined the Family, like the Gentiles in the wider world. We have some Brothers and Sisters who left home for a while, ran away maybe, and now have decided to return. Think Prodigal Son. And others who have faithfully stuck around all these years, just like the Prodigal's older brother. We are a Family. A sometimes broken and dysfunctional family, but a family none-the-less! So, our mission then, is to figure out how to put the "fun" in "dysfunctional", right? And the way that we do that, according Jesus, is by loving one another!

It's simple, right? We're a Family! But let me ask you a telling question. Who is welcome in this Family? Because that's a whole other side to the Family Value Coin! I know you've thought about that! Who is allowed to join our clan? Who is it that we are called to love, and accept, and welcome? Who is in, and who is not? What are the parameters? I mean, we have to protect the Family Name, right?

Those are questions that the Early Church had to ask and answer too. The first Christians were all Jews, if you remember. They were God's Chosen People, direct descendants of Abraham. For thousands of years these folks have been set apart as special. While those on the outside, the neighbors, everyone else in the world, were simply Gentiles. There was no intermarrying allowed, no religious tolerance of any kind, no acceptance of another's heritage, let alone another's worldview. In fact, those who did such things were punished severely.

There are those on the inside of the family, so to speak, people who are acceptable, those who live a lifestyle that conforms to expectations. And there are those on the outside, who simply do not. And there are clear lines of demarcation. So, it's easy to sort them out. Or it was, right up until Peter went and had that vision, in our reading from Acts!

Three times he heard a voice from Heaven! And three times it talked about what is "acceptable" and what is not! "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean"! Up on a rooftop, in the hot sun maybe, all of the boundary lines suddenly blur! At first Peter thought this was all about food. But then, after a side trip to Caesarea and the home of Cornelius, a Gentile if you can believe it, Peter quickly realized these visions from God have nothing to do with food at all! "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean".

By-the-way, Peter was staying at the home of Simon the Tanner at the time. And Tanners, Taxidermists, dealt daily with dead animals. According to the Levitical Laws, no God-Fearing Jew should come into contact with anything dead. That would make you “ritually unclean”. You couldn’t Worship! You couldn’t offer Sacrifices for your sins! So, Peter, by simply staying in that house, is already living on the “Wrong Side of the Tracks”!

We spend a lot of time and energy these days, allowing the World’s Values to influence the Church. When the design is actually the other way around. We need to stop arguing over worldly things! Our values are based on Scripture, on what God has to say! But that includes welcoming those from the outside into this “not-so-perfect” Family of ours!

And for me, it helps to remember who Jesus died for. He died for sinners, right, like you and me. “While we were still sinners,” it says in Romans 5:8, “Christ died for us”. He loved the un-loveable, didn’t He? He ate with Tax Collectors and Religious Hypocrites. He hung out with Betrayers and Deniers, with Narcissistic Disciples who wanted to be first, and with many who just wouldn’t listen! Some of His best friends couldn’t even stay awake when He needed them most! He truly loved the unlovable! Which is clearly a reason for us to rejoice! Only now He is calling us to do the same!

This new Commandment is a call to willingly love those who are hard to love! We are called to voluntarily care for those we may not know so well, or like so well, or agree with! We are called to cheerfully serve those with different political views, or social agendas, or different value systems entirely! We are called, in fact, to love everyone—including our Brothers and Sisters in Christ, or especially our Brothers and Sisters in Christ! And we are called to do this, NO MATTER WHAT! We are called to love those who prick us with their quills, just like Jesus loves us—unconditionally and sacrificially, steadfastly—even to the point that it hurts, even to the point where we bleed!

I am giving you a New Commandment, Love One Another! Right where you are! Right now! I want you to set aside all of your hurt! Lay down any righteous indignation! I want you to forgive, just like I forgive! And let others forgive you! From now on, I want you to Love One Another! So much so, in fact, that anyone who sees you will immediately know that you are my Disciples! And in response, want to become part of the Family!

Have you ever noticed that Biblical Covenants always have a sign associated with them, something that sets those involved apart from the wider world? The sign that you followed Abraham, was Circumcision. The sign that you followed Moses, was keeping the Sabbath. The sign that you followed John the Baptist, was that you were Baptized! Well, the sign that you follow Jesus Christ, is that you Love One Another! Regardless!

I watched another movie with my grandkids. It's called Ice Age. Maybe you've seen it? A Wolly Mammoth named Manfred, a Sloth named Sid, and a Saber-Toothed Tiger named Diego all unite to try and return a little boy to his father. In one scene, as the trio treks through a mountainous terrain of ice and snow while carrying the baby, they realize that they're on an erupting volcano. The heat of the lava melts the glacier bridges atop the ice fields, separating Diego from the others. Isolated on a quickly melting island of ice, Diego jumps to reach the others, but he falls short. Dangling from the edge of the ice field, his grip falters, and he falls. Manfred, unwilling to let Diego perish, leaps into the chasm after him, and tosses the tiger upwards to safety.

Diego, realizing the danger involved in the rescue, is moved by Manfred's compassion, courage, and sacrifice. "Why did you do that?", he asks. "You could have died trying to save me." Humbly, the Mammoth responds, "That's what you do when you are part of the herd. You look after each other." Amazed at the convergence of circumstances that has brought these three together, Sid muses aloud. "I don't know about you guys, but we are one strange herd."

Families come in all shapes and sizes, don't they? And sometimes, they are made up of pretty diverse folks. We are a strange herd indeed! Not everyone agrees! And not everyone is currently living up to the Family Values! But everyone is welcome! And everyone is loved! "You are a Family," says the Lord, "My Family! And I want everyone else to know it! So, love each other, just as I have loved you!" And all of God's people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Lord, we see your great love for us, manifest in so many ways. We see it in the beauty of the world you have given us, in the hues of the evening sky, and in the colors of the morning. We see it in the smile of a child, and in the twinkling eye of a grandparent. And we experience it personally and powerfully, in the love shared between a parent and child. But we see it most fully Lord, and most perfectly, in the sacrifice of your Son on the Cross of Calvary. Please help us to always appreciate these great gifts!

Thank you, Lord, for being our source of strength, for being the Font of Peace that we draw from when we are weary. Thank you for being the power source that energizes our spirits with your own Holy Spirit. Thank you, Lord, for your Parental Guidance, for being our Comforter and our Friend. Thank you, Lord, for all that you are, and for making us all that we are, and for encouraging us to become all that we will become! Thank you mostly, Lord, for our redemption, through the Blood of the Lamb, and for the love we witness there, as well as the opportunity to love others in the very same way.

Father, you have heard our silent prayers. You know our thoughts. You have shared in our feelings. And you have searched our hearts completely! You are aware of all our needs. You long with us in our troubles, and rejoice with us in our joys. Therefore, each of these burdens we release to you now, with confidence and in faith. And each of these blessings we celebrate with you now, offering gratitude in our hearts.

Lord, this morning we lift up before you..... Each of these loved ones, and each of these concerns, we entrust into your care. Each worry we lay before your Altar of Grace. And each celebration we offer in gratitude. May all these give you honor and praise, as we pray together now the very prayer that Jesus taught us saying, Our Father...