

## *“The family: where grace happens”*

**May 10, 2009**

*Text: Psalm 103:1-5, 8, 10-13; 1 Corinthians 12:12, 26-27*

### I.

Well, it’s Mother’s Day—a time to give thanks for our mothers and to remember mom in a special way.

On the topic of mothers, Judy Viorst once wrote an essay based on interviews she had with children. The subject was *What’s a good mother like?*

In the interview, a number of children commented on how their mothers got upset now and then ... as if the children understood that being *MOM* wasn’t always an easy job.

Nine-year old Megan said: *My mommy got so mad ... that she yanked the plate off the table and all the mashed potatoes flew into the air.*

*Wow*, replied Viorst, pretending she’d never heard of such shocking behavior. *And why would a mother do a thing like that? What happened?*

*Well*, said Megan, *she told my old brother, Mike (he’s eleven) to eat the potatoes on his plate ... and he said, later.*

*And then she told him again to eat the potatoes ... and he said, pretty soon.*

*And then she told him he’d better eat those potatoes right now and Mike said, in a minute.*

*And then she stood up and Mike finally took a bite and told her, How can I eat them? They’re cold!* Well, we can understand the mother’s frustration, can’t we?

As we think about families on this Mother’s Day, this brief glimpse into family life reminds us of how very human *our* family experiences are. Think about your family life growing up ... and then, later, raising your children and perhaps now, helping with your grandchildren.

Families are such special places, aren’t they? They’re where life happens.

### II.

Growing up, I have vivid memories of dinner time. We all had our place at the table (my two brothers, my sister and me, and my parents). Dinner was definitely a family event. We all had our shared duties, too. Always, my mom cooked; but we shared everything

else: setting the table, clearing the table, washing the dishes, drying the dishes etc.

But, again, the family dinner time was when we connected as a family: catching up on the days activities and happenings, along with discussion on a whole range of topics.

Dinner time was time, too, for special prayers. Later when Yvette and I were raising our daughters in California, we normally prayed before our evening meals. When it was Natasha's turn to offer the prayer, as a child, I remember, at some point, she would always pray for the birdies and the butterflies.

*And thank you, God, for the birdies and the butterflies*, she would say. She was probably nine or ten at the time. But these memories stay with us, don't they? Special times with family over the years.

### III.

Again, families are where life happens. They're where we live out so many human experiences that, literally, run the gamut of human feelings and emotions. All of our ups and downs of life find expression in our families.

All the joyful celebration and fun times; but the low times, too—the times of sadness, discouragement, disappointment, and sorrow.

Because of all of this, **families**—at their best—are **where grace happens**. In our families, the blood is thick and, most of the time, we go to every conceivable end to lift up and support one another.

Now, having said, that ... this doesn't mean that we necessarily *like* one another all the time. Most of the time, we do, do doubt. But there are families where some of the family members don't like each other; but, still, the blood is thick, and they'll defend one another to the end. That's what families do.

Our families are where we find unconditional love ... and acceptance. They're where we can make mistakes, fail, make a fool of ourselves, get thrown in jail, even (whatever it is, for the most part), and still come home afterwards.

We live and die with our families, don't we? They mean everything to us.

### IV.

Our reading from **1 Corinthians 12** this morning captures much of the spirit of family life. Paul talks about how, as Christians, we're all members of one body ... and part of the *body of Christ* that is the Church.

It's the same with our families—where we're all members of one body that is the family.  
CHECK IT OUT!

*For just as the body is ONE and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are ONE body, so it is with Christ.*

*If one member suffers (apply this to our families), all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.*

Family life is like that, isn't it? For sure, that's one of the abiding strengths of families. They're there for us, through thick and through thin.

We may have to *be at our best* all the time at work or on the social scene but when we come home, we can relax ... and be human ... we can make mistakes and not have every hair in place. We can exaggerate and be silly and let life come to us.

## V.

In **Kathleen Norris'** book, *Amazing Grace*, she has a chapter on *Virgin Mary, Mother of God*. It has a number of probing insights into Mary and the power she holds for countless millions in the faith.

She is—at the same time—the *humble peasant woman* and the powerful, unyielding **Mother of God**. All this emphasis on Mary may not wear too well with us Protestants. Nonetheless, Mary, as *mother*, has empathetic power. Clearly, her being, her life-experience, overflows with compassion. Think what it must have been like being Jesus' mom!

Around all of this, poet Norris notes, *there's a lot of room in Mary*. I like that. And if we think about, this applies to our families as well. *There's a lot of room in our families*. And thank God!

- Room for acceptance and understanding; room for kindness and patience;
- room for empathy and compassion; and room for all kinds of responses that give us hope.

As human beings, with all we deal with in our lives, don't we need a place where *grace happens*,

- a place where we feel safe ... where we feel loved and wanted ...
- a place where we can sing in the shower, make a mess of the jokes we try to tell,
- forget to shut off the lights now and then ... and ...
- eat a few too many chocolate chip cookies???

Again, our families are such places. They're places where we can be real—where, at their best, love is unconditional, forgiveness is unending, and the fountain of grace overflows with abundance. At their best, our churches are like that as well.

## VI.

What the idea of family means, both at home and in our churches, is ...

1. when one of us suffers, we all suffer ... the suffering, the deprivation, the hurt, the pain; it's shared.
2. And at the other end, when one of us rejoices, we all rejoice—sharing, as well, in the good feelings and the joy.

At their best, families reflect the grace of God. There's a built-in resiliency. Think of any number of high profile people who have fallen from grace ... public people ... the Governor of New York, Elliot Spitzner, comes to mind. At the end of the day, he went home to his wife and family.

Even Bernie Madoff ... who may be spending the rest of his life in prison. Still, in the interlude, he's surrounded by family.

That's what families do: they stand by us ... just as God stands by us as well. That's not to suggest that, when we mess up, that we don't need to approach God on our knees with a contrite and repentant spirit. We do. We have to meet God half way.

But, as the Psalmist reminds us, *Bless the Lord, O my soul ... for the Lord forgives our iniquity and crowns us with steadfast love and mercy.*

*The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*

## VII.

In reflecting on all of this, in both our individual and community life, don't we all need places *where grace happens* ... places where forgiveness is felt? Safe places where we can go to find respite and rest ... where we can be human and real ... and where the *timeless sweetness of LOVE* can fill our spirit.

In **Margery Williams'** *The Velveteen Rabbit*, the Rabbit and the Skin Horse are having a conversation on love and what makes it real.

*What is REAL?* asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side. *Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?*

*Real isn't how you are made, said the Skin Horse. It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become REAL.*

*Does it hurt?* asked the Rabbit.

*Sometimes,* said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. *When you are Real you don't mind being hurt.*

*Well, does it happen all at once, like being wound up,* asked the Rabbit, *or bit by bit?*

*It doesn't happen all at once,* said the Skin Horse. *You become. It takes a long time.*

- *That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept.*
- *Generally, by the time you are REAL, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby.*
- *But these things don't matter at all, because once you are REAL you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand.*

At their best, our families are places where we can be real—places **where grace happens**. They are places where the *sweetness of God's love* finds its way through the imperfections of our humanity into the depths of our soul. They are places where we feel totally loved.

**All praise be unto God! Amen!**

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