

As lovely as our Christmas Masses were, I have to say that one thing I was really looking forward to on Christmas was visiting my parents. Like everyone else in the world, I am part of a family. I'm blessed in that I can visit home frequently, and while getting together for a meal is great, more than anything I love the "home" part in "home." And by that, what I mean is it is there I can truly be myself. I can let my guard down so to speak; I know that I am loved, and the people I am around also know they are loved too.

This is not to say that my family is the model of perfection. Like every family, we have our quirks; our ups and downs. But over the years, what I can say is that our love for one another has remained strong as we've been through much, but supported one another through thick and thin. Growing in love though requires work, time and commitment. But when you love one another, you are committed to making that love grow, because that's a priority.

Jeffrey Davis is, among other things, a ham radio operator, and author of the book 1,000 marbles. How the book got its title was from his experience one day listening to another ham radio operator give some insight on his family.

One morning, he was shuffling toward the basement shack with a steaming cup of coffee in one hand and the morning paper in the other. What began as a typical Saturday morning, turned into one of those lessons that life seems to hand you from time to time.

Jeff turned the dial up into the phone portion of the band on his ham radio in order to listen to a Saturday morning swap net. Along the way, he came across an older sounding chap, with a tremendous signal and a golden voice. The kind that made him sound like he should be in the broadcasting business. He was telling whoever he was talking with something about "a thousand marbles."

Jeff was intrigued and stopped to listen to what he had to say. "Well, Tom, it sure sounds like you're busy with your job. I'm sure they pay you well but it's a shame you have to be away from home and your family so much. Hard to believe a young fellow should have to work sixty or seventy hours a week to make ends meet. Too bad you missed your daughter's dance recital."

He continued, "Let me tell you something Tom, something that has helped me keep a good perspective on my own priorities." And that's when he began to explain his theory of "a thousand marbles."

"You see, I sat down one day and did a little arithmetic. The average person lives about seventy-five years. I know, some live more and some live less, but on average, folks live about seventy-five years."

"Now then, I multiplied 75 times 52 and I came up with 3900 which is the number of Saturdays that the average person has in their entire lifetime. Now stick with me Tom, I'm getting to the important part."

"It took me until I was fifty-five years old to think about all this in any detail," he went on, "and by that time I had lived through over twenty-eight hundred Saturdays. I got to thinking that if I lived to be seventy-five, I only had about a thousand of them left to enjoy."

"So I went to a toy store and bought every single marble they had. I ended up having to visit three toy stores to roundup 1000 marbles. I took them home and put them inside of a large, clear plastic container right here in the shack next to my gear. Every Saturday since then, I have taken one marble out and thrown it away."

"I found that by watching the marbles diminish, I focused more on the really important things in life. There is nothing like watching your time here on this earth run out to help get your priorities straight."

"Now let me tell you one last thing before I sign-off with you and take my lovely wife out for breakfast. This morning, I took the very last marble out of the container. I figure if I make it until next Saturday then I have been given a little extra time. And the one thing we can all use is a little more time."

"It was nice to meet you Tom, I hope you spend more time with your family, and I hope to meet you again here on the band. 75 year Old Man, this is K9NZQ, clear and going QRT, good morning!"

Jeff writes you could have heard a pin drop on the band when this fellow signed off. He gave all the other operators a lot to think about. Jeff had planned to work on the antenna that morning, and then he was going to meet up with a few hams to work on the next club newsletter. Instead, he went upstairs and woke his wife up with a kiss.

"C'mon honey, I'm taking you and the kids to breakfast" he said.

"What brought this on?" she asked with a smile.

"Oh, nothing special, it's just been a long time since we spent a Saturday together with the kids. Hey, can we stop at a toy store while we're out? I need to buy some marbles."

Odds are you have been spending more time with your family over the Christmas holiday, and hopefully not losing your marbles while doing so. But while family can sometimes drive us crazy, the truth is as Jeffrey realized by listening to the radio that morning, is that family is such a precious gift. And while we spend much time with family, as Jeff realized it's not just a matter of living under the same roof, it's about working to make that time meaningful and to grow in love for one another that matters so much.

Today, we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family. And in his family, Jesus would have learned all of the things that Sirach talks about as part of a real holy family: honoring one's parents, praying for one another, obedience, consideration and kindness. Jesus would have also come to know all of the things that Paul would later write about to the Colossians: heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. He told them to bear with one another, forgive one another, and put on love, the bond of perfection.

Putting that on though of course isn't always easy. So how can one do that?

I think a starting point is realizing what Jeff did, namely that if family is a gift, we really have to make them a priority. It's not to say that he could not have his hobbies or get together with friends, but as his vocation was marriage, he also realized that he needed to focus more on his family too. Many spent much money on gifts this year, but the greatest gift we can give one another is the gift of time. And there's so many things that happen with time. We learn about what's going on in one another's lives. We connect more deeply with each other. And we create memories that last a lifetime. The gift of time is one of the greatest gifts we receive and give, so don't just give it over the holidays.

With that too is making sure the marble jar that says faith is also full for our family. Luke's story of Mary and Joseph finding Jesus in the Temple is theologically important because while we of course know very little about the childhood of Jesus, what we do know is that He was clearly connected deeply with His father. He is in the Temple, and says "did you not know that I must be in my Father's House?" As I shared at Christmas, sometimes in a family faith can be one of many things, when it really has to be a priority. God loves us, and is there to bless our families. So make him the center by praying daily together, by going to Mass and explaining to the kids why we go, by praying before a meal, and living out the commandment to love one another as Jesus loves us by showing compassion and mercy within the family. When we have faith at the center, it brings such blessings and helps a family to grow in love.

Growth in a family also happens when each member is willing to grow too. I recently read a story shared by a mom who had a unique situation, much like that of that old Lucille Ball and Henry Fonda film "Yours, Mine and Ours" where two families came together with a number of children. Some of the kids were older and there were challenges, even some resentment. The mother though realized she was just praying God would fix the kids, when she perhaps needed to fix herself first. So she changed as a person; she showed acts of kindness and listened and got rid of resentment in her heart, and a funny thing happened - she grew closer to her new stepchildren. Note the line in the Gospel, "they did not understand what he said to them." Mary and Joseph aren't fully aware of all who Jesus is yet. But they grow as people. Stubbornness can be an obstacle to growth. It's important to look at our attitude, and what we do and don't do for our families and ask ourselves questions like do we listen enough, do we do our fair share and help one another out, do we let go of things and forgive. We can be quick to recognize when we are wronged and often our anger or frustration with a family

member can be justified, but we also need to look at ourselves too and realize we too can cause misunderstandings or difficulties within a family, and be open to God's grace to becoming a better person.

It's also important to remember that simple actions do so much. From the sounds of it Jeff and his wife didn't have a bad marriage, but by him going up to wake up his wife with a kiss and offer to her and the kids out for breakfast, it was a simple action that spoke volumes to them. When you see artists depictions of the Holy Family, you will often see Joseph building something as a carpenter, or Mary sitting while looking tenderly on the boy Jesus as he plays at her feet. When I look at my own family, what stands out are the many simple things that I've been a part of and seen over the years from the love between my parents, to those simple actions of kindness that my parents have shown me. Ask any parent and they'll probably say a drawing that their five year old made for them means a lot more to them than something expensive that goes into a box, and ask any grown child what mattered more, the gift they got when they were 10 or their dad spending time with them playing with them and you know what the answer will be. So we always need to look for ways to love one another each day, remembering that simple actions of kindness and gentleness do so much.

It also goes without saying forgiveness means so much too which is why Paul stresses it in our second reading. In a family, inevitably we hurt one another. From an early age, a parent emphasizes that while a bad action has a consequence, love is never withdrawn. As life goes on though it can be easy to hold on to anger or resentments. When we let go of these things though we grow closer together.

And lastly, two sides of the same coin: obedience, and trust.

The Gospel tells us that the boy Jesus was obedient to Mary and Joseph as the years went by. Sirach stresses this too. Sometimes as kids we rebel, but if you are still growing up, remember the rules of the house aren't there to hinder you, but to help you. So listen to mom and dad. But for all of us, we need to heed the rules of God's house too and remember His rules, namely the commandments, are also there to help us.

But the other side of that is trust. Every parent finds themselves at some point challenged by seeing their children grow and become their own person. The child starts out as utterly dependent upon their parents, and as such, they are sort of an extension of them. But the child is not a child forever. Jesus grows in wisdom, age and grace with God and men as Luke puts it. To grow in love is to grow in the capacity both to trust and to be trusted, though there are many aspects of love, of which trust is merely one. I look at my own life and I can pick out multiple moments from the time when I was 18 until 25 when I started seminary where I wish I could go back and say "don't do that, that's a really bad decision!" But through all these moments, my parents always believed in and trusted in me. Children are not clones of their parents; they find their own dreams and discern God's call for them, sometimes it just takes a bit of time. So give good advice, speak your mind, but ultimately trust that your loved ones will figure things out in due time.

If we had jars that held marbles for the things we spend time on, odds are if you measured it in just time alone, there would be a lot to fill the jar marked "family." But time is just the tip of the iceberg - the time we spend with our families needs to also be quality time. With God's grace, we can do so much to make our families holy too by doing what it takes to deepen our relationships with our loved ones. If Jesus were in front of us face to face, we'd probably treat Him with deep respect. But sometimes we forget that Jesus is also present in one another. As Jesus grew in wisdom, age and favor, so too did Mary and Joseph as they came to understand who their Son was. May we do the same as we grow in love for one another, never forgetting what an incredible gift our families are.