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“The Family Table”

A sermon by Sam R. Miglarese

First Sunday after Christmas (Year C)

December 30, 2012

1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 2:41-52

On this, the first Sunday after Christmas, we have a renewed opportunity to explore in a deeper way the meaning of Christmas, the mystery of Christmas: God among us, God taking on our human flesh fully and completely, our conviction that light has entered the darkness as we anticipate the festival of the Epiphany.

The story that we just heard from Luke gives us an opportunity to see how important family is during the course of our understanding of the mystery of Christmas. It is a traditional theme at this Sunday of the year, but this text revolves around the anxiety of parenthood. We reflect through the eyes of the parents of Jesus on the ways in which his family and ours give life, nourish, and strengthen us so that children grow in years and in wisdom and with divine grace and favor.

But at the same time, we celebrate the gift of family in the midst of Christmas; there is always the empty place at the family table that gives us pause to reflect on the mystery of it all. I think all of us have examples of the ways in which a child is off deployed to Afghanistan or Iraq and is not present at the table. We mourn our children sick in the hospital with diseases that go undiagnosed. We know of many broken relationships within families that cause pain and concern. Like the story of Jesus in today’s Gospel, all’s well that ends well. Jesus is found. He is returned to his family and ultimately, despite their distress, ends up obedient to his mother and father in the return to Nazareth.

But not all stories end so well. We know that. One of the dominant images that captures my imagination as we review 2012, all the top lists for sports and finances

and the media—you've seen them, you've read them, you know of them, you have your own, probably—but the one that stands out most for me is the image, the emotion of mourning, grief, and deep and profound loss.

All of us know that this past year, we've lost family members and friends to sickness and death. We know that we've experienced relationships that are broken and still stay estranged. We've all experienced our own personal defeats, our disappointments, difficulties that we live in a stressful world. We mourn together the sorrowful deaths of Peter Knauert and Florence McDow—little ones who did not deserve the deaths they experienced.

The image that stands out for me the most that I continue to grapple with is the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, CT. In the midst of all that, on Christmas Eve, Joe said to us in his invitation to the Table, "God does not intend to let the darkness have its way." That is a conviction that we celebrate in Christmas. It is a conviction that we hold, and yet in the midst of it, we grope for a response as parents, as educators, as citizens.

I don't know how you handled the massacre at Sandy Hook, but as a parent, I held my children tight. This congregation is full of educators, from presidents of colleges to theologians to teachers to administrators to professors of all kinds. We know how sacrosanct our schools are. Our universities, public or private schools, or whatever school our children attend are not places of violence. It frustrates us. It angers us. Finally as citizens, I don't know what the response will be. Our president has called for meaningful action. We will see what comes of that. But I think all of us, no matter what our political affiliations are, sense that "meaningful action" is demanded in the midst of all this.

But what about us as people of faith? How do we understand what seems to be unintelligible? My message to you today is the message of the Gospel, the message of the Word. It is a message that allows us, in some way as men and women of faith, to deal with the mystery of evil. Hannah Arendt wrote of the banality of evil. How many suicide/murders have we heard about and read about and experienced these last few months? We know that evil is not a problem to be solved. It's a mystery. Read the first eleven chapters of Genesis. Study the doctrines of original sin in our Book of Confessions. Remind yourself of the ways in which our own sins have affected our lives. We run into limitations. But still God's work today offers light in terrible darkness. And Joe said, "In the ministry and life of Jesus, a light has come into the world that the darkness cannot overcome. We light candles

to remind ourselves that God's light can chase away the darkness."

So as I hear the Word of the Lord today, in the stories of Luke and Colossians in particular, I detect three directions for us: the way of compassion, the way of prayer, and the way of hope.

The way of compassion. It is central to the Gospel. It is at the heart of the Gospel. Paul calls us to bear one another's burdens. A reading from Colossians begins with these words, and I note that this particular text from Colossians is so often selected by couples at their weddings: "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience" (Colossians 3:12).

How did you respond with compassion to the events in Connecticut? As a family, we talked about it. We tried to explain it to our youngest daughter. We thought about sending money, toys, and letters. We ended up going as a family to a vigil that Joe and others had organized in the community, and it was interesting that at that vigil, the candles kept being blown out in the wind and the cold. We kept lighting them in the midst of it all.

How do we exercise compassion in the circumstances of Sandy Hook? My response is simply that we need to be present to the parents, the children, and the educators in the community itself, to sit with it in silence, to be present to their suffering, not trying to solve it, but to be with them in our own way to bear their suffering with compassion.

The way of prayer. If you follow Marilyn's carefully crafted prayers during the course of this season, you will note that she formulated well for us our prayer that we sometimes can't voice from our hearts. One of the prayers of Advent that stands out as so powerful for us during this season is the simple prayer, "Come, Lord Jesus, save your people." I invite you to sit with those words. Let them echo in your hearts. Repeat them: "Come, Lord Jesus. Come, Lord Jesus." We know that the end time is not fully and completely here. We know that in this in-between time, we are going to experience darkness, sometimes unimaginable evil, death, and loss. And yet, we still have the conviction to pray. "Come, Lord Jesus, save us." We cannot do it by ourselves. We cannot extricate ourselves from the darkness and the forces that threaten to destroy us and to destroy those dearest to us. We must pray that this child who grows in wisdom and increases in years under the guidance of favor and grace from God the Father will become for us a Savior who

redeems this world.

The way of hope. I don't know of any other word in the Advent/Christmas season that captures the heart of the Christian message with all the promises God has made for us than Hope. We hope that He will be the light in the darkness. Hope is not wishful thinking that bad things will go away. We know that's not the case of hope. We are called upon to engage and claim it. The hope offered us by the Word of God is a promise that only God can make. We are called upon to grab it, to allow it to become for us a gift of God because it's a promise our faithful God has made to us.

In a conversation with a classmate of mine from seminary, he shared me these thoughts in his grappling with the tragedy at Sandy Hook. "The promise is this," he said, "what is now will not be. What is now is crushing grief and loss. That is not your future! Your future is a transformed world and a healed humanity. That is our future. Now, in this moment, that future seems impossible and distant. Of course, it has not arrived. That is why we hold it in hope as a promise that only God can make."

Here we are, gathered around the table of God's Word and Sacrament, and we affirm that, in the face of death, our God always brings life. In this moment, and in this place, with heavy hearts as we begin a new year together with hope, we embrace the way of compassion, the way of prayer, the way of hope, and say these words early and often: "Come, Lord Jesus, save your people."

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