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Family relationships are often complex, complicated and ever-changing. Some families are extended, interracial, multicultural and multilingual. Some parents within the family unit are heterosexual, same-sex or single parents. Some families are native to a country; others are immigrants or naturalized citizens.

The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph

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Sirach 3:2-6, 12-14

Psalm 128

Colossians 3:12-21

Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

Whatever the case may be, families today are diverse. Power relations within families are also diverse. Some families are matriarchal, some are patriarchal, and some enjoy shared power. Families differ from culture to culture, from country to country, from region to region.

In the Bible, particular in the Old Testament with the New Testament being no exception, we see families that are patriarchal, a model shaped by androcentric attitudes. Fathers are "over" their children; wives derive their security from their husbands; women are to bear children and be subservient to their husbands.

This last Sunday of the calendar year celebrates the feast of the Holy Family. The liturgical readings portray marriage as heteronormative and the family unit as patriarchal.

The first reading from Ben Sirach outlines the various responsibilities that children have toward their parents. Here, the family unit is intricately linked together through the actions of the child. Sons are charged with taking care of their fathers in old age, especially when a father's health begins to fail. The focus of the reading is the father. Nothing is said about care for the mother in her old age.

For young and adult "children" who have suffered abuse or traumas at the hands of their parents, this reading is hard to hear and certainly not welcomed as "the word of God." For those who are unable to honor their parents for one reason or another, this passage calls into question divine love and beneficence. Is it unconditional or conditional? This biblical account would have one understand that divine love and beneficence toward humans is contingent upon proper human behavior.

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The responsorial psalm begins on an inclusive note: Everyone who loves God and walks in God's ways will be blessed and favored. The term "Lord" coupled with the male pronoun "his" is a kyriarchal portrait of the divine. This male deity who is to be loved by all is "over" all and "superior" to all as the term "Lord" admits.

The inclusive language of the psalm changes quickly in the second stanza. The one addressed is now a male husband whose family will flourish because of the husband's love for God. The two similes derived from the natural world reflect an agrarian culture.

In the third stanza, the man has become a model citizen who is wished even more blessings. The family thrives only because of the posture and actions of the male head of household. Kyriarchy and patriarchy intersect; women and children are not favored by the divine independent of the male husband. The family unit is patriarchal.

The reading from Colossians picks up on the theme of love introduced in the responsorial psalm. All the virtues flow from love and are held together in unity by love. A life rooted in Christ's peace and word assures ongoing communal unity in "one body." The community of believers is called to do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus and to give thanks to God the Father through him.

Here the kyriarchal term "Lord" describes Jesus, and God is called "Father." The community cannot give thanks to God directly; they are to go through Jesus. The descriptions for the divine are once again male, patriarchal and hierarchal.

This tone comes to the fore again in the family unit where wives are told to be subordinate to their husbands "as is proper to the Lord," and children are to be obedient to their parents. Thus, women are to be subordinate to God, Jesus and their husbands. The last part of this reading reflects and sanctions hegemonic masculinity, and when proclaimed as "the word of the Lord," hegemonic masculinity becomes divinely sanctioned.

The Gospel focuses on the Holy Family. The story is part of the infancy narrative. In two dreams, Joseph receives two sets of divine instructions aimed at keeping his family safe. Again, a male is given preferential treatment. Joseph, not Mary, has the dreams. Joseph is the head of the household.

Of interest is the point that the feast is the "Holy Family" and yet, the language of the account keeps Joseph at a distance from the child. Joseph is a "stepfather" and as such, is marginalized, a sentiment communicated by such phrases as "the child and his mother."

In sum, through these readings for the feast of the Holy Family, we see how cultural attitudes and norms have not only shaped the portrait of the family unit and the divine but also influenced our understanding of both. What does "the holy family" look like in this 21st century?

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