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The Secrets of Every Happy Family – Wk #1
The Holy Family
Winter – Lit Year C

Well, Happy New Year. I hope everybody had a great Christmas. And now that we're back into ordinary time today, we're starting a brand new message series for the New Year called, "Secrets of Every Happy Family." This is going to be a great series for us because it applies to everybody. All of us have a family. We've all come from a family of some sort, though, of course, our experiences are pretty diverse based on a variety of factors. One factor is size. Some of you came from large families; others of you were only children. A lot of us came from kind of that mid-size family, two, three, four, five kids - that is sort of pretty typical. And you know what? All those families are the same. At least they share some things in common if you grew up in a family like that.

If you were the oldest in your family growing up, you had to be the responsible one. You were the one your parents obsessed over because they didn't know what they were doing. And as a result, you are now OCD, and you need therapy. If you were the middle

child, you felt unloved. You felt overlooked and neglected. Guess what? That wasn't a feeling; that was a fact. But now you're 40. You need to get over it. If you were the youngest, you got away with murder. You did whatever you pleased because, by the time they got to you, your parents were exhausted. And you know what? You need to know, we all resent you.

Some of us grew up in a fairly traditional home with a working dad and a stay-at-home mom. Some had two working parents or a single parent. Our experiences were very diverse for sure. Along with that, we're also at very different places currently when it comes to family. Some of you are like me - you're unmarried. And so when we talk about family, you're thinking of your family of origin or your extended family. So as we go through this series, you're thinking about brothers, and sisters, and nieces, and nephews, and cousins, and aunts. Some of you are single, but one day you plan to get married. You hope to get married or maybe to get married again. And so as we go through this series, you're thinking about a future kind of family. Maybe you're in the midst of raising kids right now and so as you go through this series, you're dealing with real-time issues like what happened in the car before you got here this morning.

And then still others, you've already raised your kids, and so you're onto the next stage. As we go through this series, you're thinking about your role as grandparents or great-grandparents. Our experiences of family, both past, present, and to come are diverse for sure, but there is one thing that we all share in common. We all have very strong emotions when it comes to family. Father is not an emotionally neutral word. Mother is not an emotionally neutral word. "Brother" or "sister" are not emotionally neutral terms. Simply mentioning those words brings to mind concrete memories and important experiences of specific people who have shaped our lives. Our family experience brings our greatest joy and our fondest memory. It's why we look forward to the Christmas holidays or a summer vacation. Our families can be the place where we can simply be ourselves and not have to put on airs or pretend.

On the other hand, our families can also be the source of our greatest wounds, of our deepest hurts and frustrations. And while we're known in our families, we can also be misunderstood there or put into a box or a stereotype that does not understand our ability to grow and to change. Does not appreciate the fact that we're no longer 12 years old. It's that wounded part of us. They can make us want to run away from our families or avoid them altogether. It's that unmet expectation, those times

that we're misunderstood that can tempt us to give up on ever hoping to have a happy family. And the holidays - the holidays! The holidays are the perfect reminder to us of this mix. This messed up mix of emotions. You know, going into the Christmas holiday, you might've had the highest hopes, the greatest expectation for family time. But at this point on the other side of it, you can't wait to get away from it all. No? So let's just acknowledge that this is an emotionally charged topic.

Also, the promise of this series is a big one. We're claiming to talk about the secrets of every happy family. It was the writer Leo Tolstoy who said, " Every happy family is happy in the same way. Every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." And what he meant, I think, is that when we get it wrong, we can get it wrong in limitless ways. When we're getting it right, it's really a template. We don't propose to know all of the secrets of every happy family. But for the purpose of this series, we're going to look at three principles that are generally considered universally applicable. Over the course of this series, we're going to return to these principles again and again. But this morning briefly, I just want to outline all of them for you.

The first principle or secret of a happy family is that they accept the messiness. The messiness of family

life and they attempt to do that with grace and flexibility. When it comes to our families, there's this huge gap, huge gap between the ideal and the real. And that's always been the case if you look back into history. If you look at the Bible, look at the stories of the families in the Old Testament, you can see this very clearly. They were all flawed. They were all dysfunctional. In Adam and Eve's family, there was fratricide. In Noah's family, alcoholism. In Abraham's family, adultery. In David's family, incest. Later, when the nation of Israel descends into civil war, it's essentially a family squabble that starts all the trouble.

So let me just make an obvious statement, a common sense statement that we can easily forget. There are no perfect people; therefore there are no perfect families. Every family is a collection of imperfect people. It's a hard lesson to keep in mind because we always think the grass is greener in somebody else's family. You can probably remember back to high school or college. Your friends' families seem so much more functional and friendly and fun. Their parents were so much cooler than your own. And for those of you who are married, when you first met your spouse's family, you thought they were great. And now you know that they are great. Really, honey, they're great. Time and again, we're confronted with the imperfections, the weakness, and

the flawed personality traits of our family members. We know them so well. We know them better than anything. We know them better than anyone because we have lived with them. We have gone on vacation with them. We have had dinner with them. They can be frustrating. They can be annoying. They can be heartbreaking.

Also, when it comes to our family members, we naturally have expectations for them. We want their affection and their attention for sure, but we want more than that too. We want their approval. We want their support. And when we don't get it, which happens all the time, when we don't get it, we have a choice to make. We can hold their faults and failures against them and start keeping score, which is always an entertaining thing to do, or we can extend patience. We can overlook a fault or a failure. We can adjust our expectations. That's a very useful thing to do. Adjusting your expectation. For example, I've learned this with my brother. I love my younger brother. I do. I love him, and I appreciate him. And if you're watching this morning online, I want you to know that, Gary. He's not, by the way, but my sister is and she'll call him right after this.

My brother is great. I love him, and I admire him, but he is a very old-school Catholic. Do you know what I mean by that? He's a very old-school Catholic. You

probably have somebody like that in your family too. And as a result of that, he just does not get what we do here. I mean not at all. He doesn't get the band or the screens or the technology or the small groups. And for a while, that was very frustrating to me. It even made me a little bit sad. But I eventually came round to recognize that he supports me in other and fairly significant ways. Ways that he's good at and that he can. And it was kind of a fruitless for me to be looking for support in a way that wasn't going to be there and probably never will be. Adjusting expectations can be extremely helpful. Happy families accept the complications, the difficulty, and the messiness of our family relationship. And we're going to talk a lot more about that in this series.

The second secret of a happy family is that it's marked by mutual respect. Respect is everybody's job. Members honor and respect each other. This respect begins first and foremost with an appreciation of God's authority. That's a big one. When parents give up, when they see their spiritual authority over the family, they open family life up to all manner of conflict and chaos. It's like leaving the front door of your house open. You have no idea who or what is going to wander in. Respect, first of all, has to be accorded to God's authority over the family.

Next, it's about the spouses themselves. How you treat your spouse is huge when it comes to the happiness of the family. And I'm just going to say this, I'm going to go ahead and say this. It all begins with the husband. Guys, how you honor and respect your wife is the rudder of the ship that is your family. Let me say that again. How you honor and respect your wife is the rudder of the ship that is your family. It will determine everything else. So you should hold yourself to a zero-tolerance policy when it comes to disrespect or criticism. Now, disagreement is different. It's inevitable, but it should be dealt with privately, quickly and efficiently. The same, of course, is true for wives. You know, when you put down your husband or criticize him to your friends, those words, that display of disrespect, it will do damage to your family. It will be hurtful to your kids too.

Of course, sometimes it's necessary to seek out advice from somebody else when it comes to your marriage and what's going on there, but complaint and gossip, that's different. Complaint and gossip should be out of the question. And be careful of sarcasm too. Playful is fine, but passive aggressive is not. And you know the difference. If you have something to say, say it.

Next. How adult children are treating their parents is also hugely important in the formation of the next

generation. Your kids are carefully watching how you're treating your parents. And in the process, they're learning on how they're going to treat you. If respect is characterizing all the relationships of the parents, that will create an atmosphere, an environment in which the children grow and learn. It will be what they know to do.

Third principle or secret to every happy family is a commitment to a larger purpose beyond themselves. A family that exists just for itself will not be happy. It will never be happy. The affection of a family bond is not enough to keep a family together because the family is not just about the people in the family. The family is the basic building block of society. As family relationships are healthy, so goes the culture. As family relationships deteriorate so too the culture. We see this so clearly when it comes to the tragedy of so many fatherless families in Baltimore City and elsewhere.

Without a healthy home environment, kids will turn to all kinds of things to find love, acceptance, and engagement. Healthy family relationships impact every aspect of our culture, business, education, government, medicine, and public safety. For those of you with employees, you know well when people's families are healthy because they're more productive. They're more successful at work. Teachers, you

know that when students have support and encouragement at home, it shows in their schoolwork. Good family relationships contribute to the quality of life for all of us.

Well, today is the feast of the Epiphany, a great feast day of the Church, which essentially continues and concludes the season of Christmas. The Magi sometimes called the kings, which perhaps who knows, they were maybe traveling thousands of miles, risking all manner of danger and discomfort to eventually visit a family. Think about it. The destination for their epic journey is this simple single, poor family, Mary Joseph and the child Jesus. When they finally arrive, scripture tells us, "They saw the child with Mary, his mother, then they worshiped and gave gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh."

When you think about the stories of the Christmas season that we have been listening to, that we've been celebrating and singing about these past weeks, all the heroes and saints, the villains, the miracles, the wonders, the angels. The center of this splendid story is a family. It's all about a family. Joseph who accepts the role of being the foster father of Jesus under the most unique circumstances and with great courage leads his family through some very difficult and dangerous situations.

Mary who accepts the role of motherhood and shows her own courage, knowing that people will misunderstand and misinterpret her situation. Christmas celebrates the gift of salvation, God's action to save his people from sin and death. And that gift is given in the context of a family, and the courage of a man and woman to undertake the challenge of family life. God chose to show His own love and care for the world through a family because the family is an image and reflection of God Himself and God's love for us. It's an imperfect reflection for sure, but it is a reflection. Its imperfections in fact and our frustration with its imperfections point to our desire for something more. Our desire for something more that is ultimately the family of God. What God is doing, what God is building is a family of His own, and we get to be a part of it.