In Jesus, Mary, & Joseph we have the model of what it means to be a family, and familial love is the focus of our scripture excerpts this week. Chief among the attributes of a loving family is the way we honor our spouse, parents, grandparents, children, and siblings. This is not always easy and at times can be most difficult.

Tobit Heals His Blind Father
As my father grew old and his health, both mental and physical, began to fail my patience was sorely tested. He became more disagreeable and when he had to be placed in a nursing home he rebelled. He had always been an independent thinker and succeeded in life with what appeared to be sheer determination. Though he had never attended college – a dream interrupted by the great depression and World War II – he was able to leave a sales career to start and succeed in forming an engineering company. More than his business success, it was his dedication to his family that has impressed me the most. His manner was often rough, but when it came to taking care of others there was no limit to his efforts. When his own parents grew old and infirmed he regularly made the 200+ mile trip to his parent’s home to make sure all was well. When he found that it was no longer safe for them to live on their own he took over their affairs and made sure they were cared for until they passed away in their 80’s. All this reminds me of the wisdom from Sirach in
our first reading this week, "My son, take care of your father when he is old; grieve him not as long as he lives." (Sirach 3:12)

Sirach goes on to write, "Even if his mind fails, be considerate of him; revile him not all the days of his life." This may be an even harder ideal, to honor someone, even your own father, when they appear to be unruly and disagreeable. I hope I did my best to honor my parents as they grew old and that my example was the best one I could give my children. As they say, be nice to your children – they are the ones to choose your nursing home. Though this saying is meant to be humorous there is truth in it that is reflected in St. Paul's letter to the Colossians. He writes, "Fathers do not provoke your children, so they do not become discouraged." Our good treatment of family members encourages honor, respect, and love in return.

As important as care for our parents is, when one marries our primary responsibility shifts from our parents to our spouse and so St. Paul writes, "Husbands love your wives, and avoid any bitterness towards them." (Colossians 3:19) Paul goes even further when he writes, "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church." (Ephesians 5:25) Not to put too fine a point on it, this means laying down one's life for one's spouse. When we can live according to these high ideals we not only foster love in our families we instruct our children on what a healthy, loving marriage looks like. Sure, we all fall short of such high ideals from time to time, but if we can keep returning to them we will have done the right thing. This is the point of what Paul instructs at the beginning of today's selection, "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do. (Colossians 3:12-13) In the spiritual life, it is not about getting it right all the time, rather it is about what we do when we get it wrong. This is the spirituality of imperfection.

And just so we don't get the wrong idea about this ideal, it doesn't mean that we just let things slide when we have been wronged, that would not honor the family either. Paul also directs families to "teach and admonish one another," but this must be done in Christian charity. (Colossians 3:16) So the basis of honor is love that is the "bond of perfection." Perhaps if we strive for this ideal we will experience the peace promised by the example of the Holy Family, even though we are by no means perfect, and on the days we fall short our acceptance of God's grace will make up for what is lacking. As Paul wrote to the Romans, "...transgression might increase but, where sin increases, grace overflows all the more..." (Romans 5:20)