

HomeWord

Dedicated to household harmony & family faith

Sharing About

- Blended Families' Common Misunderstandings
- Step Parenting Woes
- Reflecting the Paschal Mystery

The Right Road by Susan Archer

Blending our stepfamily has been a journey of discovery for my husband, Mike, and me. We feel as if Jesus has been guiding us ever since the day we first met.

Mike and I met in church. I was a new member and had been asked to start a Bible study class for singles. On the first day of class, Mike walked in. He had belonged to the church for a while and had recently separated from his wife. Two of our pastors had escorted him in, telling him, "You need to be in this class."

Mike and I saw each other often at singles' events. After his divorce was final, we started dating. We soon fell in love and were married.

Nothing prepared us for the collision of our romantic fantasies with the realities of daily living in a blended family. Shortly after moving in together, we found ourselves arguing about all kinds of things. Mike's two teenagers lived with their mom. My two children, who were in fifth and eighth grade, lived part of the time with us. All six of us started to voice what we were thinking.

"You're not my parent!"

"Your kids don't do anything around this house!"

"There's a double standard here!"

"I'm tired of walking on eggshells just to keep the peace!"

Mike and I realized we were in danger of running off the road, but we had Jesus walking with us. Our faith gave us the courage to tell each other what we were really thinking. Once we realized what was on each other's

minds, we were able to do something constructive about what we heard.

One night Mike and I were washing the dishes. My two kids weren't helping. Mike had been fuming at me for weeks, and I was sick and tired of listening to him so I took action. I got my two kids out of their rooms, and the four of us sat down at the kitchen table.

We had our first family meeting. We decided that everyone had to either cook or do dishes. Each family member was allowed one "bye" a week, when they didn't have to do anything. Then the four of us got up and did the rest of the dishes together.

When families blend different people and different family cultures come together. Every person, and every family, has different strengths and weaknesses. Realizing that I have weaknesses is hard. Listening to someone tell me about my kids' shortcomings is also difficult. What is even worse is realizing that I have to change and that my kids have to change too.

But that is what happens when you walk with Jesus. You find yourself having to change and you realize that the change is good.

Our first family meeting was more than five years ago, but our decision that night is still working. When our kids are home, everyone still has to help. And you know what? We laugh and talk together a lot when we cook and wash the dishes.

(Susan Archer lives with her husband, Mike, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.)

Normal Fantasies

In her book *Your Blended Family's Road Map: A Step-By-Step Guide for Blending Your Stepfamily* (Milwaukee, WI: Together Publishing, 1999), p. 19), Susan Archer offers an exercise on normal fantasies in blended families. For more information on this book, visit the Together Publishing Web site at www.execpc.com/~together.

The following is a list of normal fantasies. Circle the items that apply to you. Talk them over with your partner, kids, and stepkids.

- Expecting your stepchildren to love you, their stepbrothers, and their stepsisters instantly.
- Assuming that children or stepchildren who do not live with you will not affect your marriage.
- Assuming you will not have to deal with your new partner's ex-husband, ex-wife, or memories of a partner who passed away.
- Expecting a woman to be instantly maternal with stepkids, because she is a woman.
- Expecting a man to be the breadwinner for your whole blended family without any help.
- Expecting your partner to take care of the stepkids, so you will not have to deal with them.
- Expecting grown children and stepchildren to have no effect on your marriage.
- Expecting your superior parenting skills to fix the irritating habits of your stepkids.

Blended Families Reveal the Paschal Mystery

by Rev. Chuck Wood

Can you think of another way to describe Mary, Joseph, and Jesus besides *the Holy Family*? One could also call them a blended family. After all, blended families or stepfamilies form when two adults marry and at least one has a child or children not biologically related to the other spouse. That's what you get with this small Jewish family from Nazareth.

Looking at the Holy Family this way, perhaps more of us can relate to these three people. For instance, at next Sunday's worship, look around and pick out six young people who look like they are under eighteen. Chances are that at least one of them is a stepchild. Also look for ten married couples. Four of them probably represent a remarriage. Finally, find five sets of parents and children. One of those five families will likely be a blended family, with at least one stepchild under eighteen. In fact, a few years from now your congregation could very well have more blended families than any other kind.

The challenges, chaos, and confusion that commonly mark blended families can make it hard for them to see themselves and their new household as holy.

Yet in *Follow the Way of Love: A Pastoral Message of the U.S. Bishops to Families* ([Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, Inc., 1994], p. 6), our U.S. bishops tell us that "in every family God is revealed uniquely and personally, for 'God is love and those who live in love, live in God and God dwells in them (1 Jn. 4:16)'" How might the members of a blended family see themselves as uniquely and personally revealing God's life and love? How might others recognize this active presence in them?

First, asking about God's presence in any family calls to mind some encouragement that one married man gives in a faith-centered reflection on marriage. In the introduction to his

book *Marriage and the Spirituality of Intimacy* ([Cincinnati, OH: Saint Anthony Messenger Press, 1996], p. x), Leif Kehrwald says, "God is just as present in the creases and folds of our hectic lives as in church on Sunday morning." That should give blended families cause to celebrate. Why? Because they probably feel like their particular brand of hectic life has a lot more "creases and folds" than does a so-called traditional family. More creases and folds mean more places where God can be present!

It's not just the mix of families that identifies a blended family. More importantly, it's the dynamic blend of loss and hope, of destruction and transformation. It's a weaving of new life, new faithfulness, from experiences of death and betrayal.

We can describe blended families this way. It's also one way to describe the turning point of our faith. The very stuff of Christ's suffering and death was the raw material that God molded into victory, hope, and love in the Resurrection. Jesus, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, has continued working these things together to form us into a family. This is the ongoing story of our faith.

When we want to sum up that story, we can use the phrase *paschal mystery*. If we want to show a living expression of the story, we can point to the blended families among us. Their stories of new life rising out of death, either the death of a spouse

and parent or the death of a relationship, uniquely enable them to identify with Christ.

The U.S. bishops were right when they stated that God is revealed uniquely and personally in all families. This is particularly true in blended families who can embrace and express the paschal mystery in a down-to-earth way unlike many other families.

(Rev. Chuck Wood is a member of the Brotherhood of the People of Praise and serves as a priest in the Archdiocese of Portland, Oregon.)

Split Ends: Teenage Stepchildren

by Ruth Webber

A book recommendation from the Stepfamily Association of America (www.stepfam.org).

Dr. Webber's work shines when she tackles the issue of teenage stepchildren. There are no simple solutions for helping teenage stepchildren understand stepfamily life, but there are a range of options that other teenagers have tried and found to have worked for them. With an abundance of examples from *Divided Loyalty*, *Access* [visitation], *Being Invaded?*, *Gaining Freedom*, and *Frustrations and Annoyances to Giving It a Go*, *Split Ends* talks with, not at, teens. That is a great deal to accomplish in a single book.

The tone of *Split Ends* is matter-of-fact and positive; it is also richly sprinkled with cartoons. I particularly appreciated the emphasis on encouraging teens to build goodwill instead of blaming their unhappiness on being in a stepfamily.

Split Ends can be ordered from the Barnes and Noble Web site, www.bn.com.

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