

But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

¹⁰*In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered. ¹¹Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters. ^c ¹²He says,*

*“I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the assembly I will sing your praises.” ^d*

¹³*And again,*

“I will put my trust in him.” ^e

And again he says,

“Here am I, and the children God has given me.” ^f

¹⁴*Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—¹⁵and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. ¹⁶For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham’s descendants. ¹⁷For this reason he had to be made like them, ^mfully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. ¹⁸Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. (Hebrews 2:9-18)*

Welcome Home!

Welcome home! Does this place feel like home to you? Some of you might answer yes. Recently, I’ve noticed how brave our principal’s little daughter is when she’s in this building. She’s here so much that this probably feels like an extension of her house. And I’m sure she’s not the only one who feels that way. For many of us here today, coming into this building, surrounding ourselves with the people we see here, just feels right. It feels like home. But is that true for all of us? Some people who are here today might say that this place has never felt like home. You might feel like you’re a stranger here, like no one cares about you here. If that’s true for you, that truly makes me sad, because God designed the church to be a spiritual family. Isn’t being with family the thing that makes a place home? When my family moved to Livonia, we left behind a house that we had lived in for nine years, the only home that my children remembered. But from that moment on, “going home” meant going to the house we lived in here. And what made it home? Our family was there. What makes this church building home? Our spiritual family is here. Today, we want to embrace that reality. We want to make this our spiritual home.

I.

Hebrews chapter two tells us something that is truly remarkable: God the mighty Maker of the universe is our brother. The chapter is talking about Jesus, God the Son. The chapter before that – which we didn’t read this morning – calls Jesus **“the heir of all things,”** and **“the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being.”** It says that he sustains all things by his powerful word and that all God’s angels worship him. Jesus is all that. And he is our brother.

What it would be like to have a brother who was that great? Could it be a bad thing? I have an older brother who had an undiagnosed learning disability when we were in school. To this day, reading is very difficult for him. When I attended a Lutheran elementary school, we had sixth, seventh and eighth grades all in the same classroom, so he and I were in the same room. And our teacher used to let me take the tests my brother was taking and then the teacher would compare our grades. Because my brother almost couldn’t read, I

always did better than he did. I was too stupid and too egotistical to even think about what that did to him. Imagine what it would be like to have Jesus as the perfect older brother who always made you feel stupid and sinful and worthless. That's not the point here. The point here is that Jesus loves us so much that he came down from heaven and made himself our brother.

Hollywood loves the cliché of the embarrassing relative. The brother who has no social skills but shows up at your house when you're trying to impress your boss. The cousins who live in a Winnebago and make your neighbors wish you'd move when they park that Winnebago at your house for the holidays. They love to make cringeworthy scenes about those relatives humiliating the main character, so the main character tries to hide those relatives. Jesus felt no shame about coming to come to us poor and embarrassing relatives. The Lord of heaven was made a little lower than the angels – he took on human flesh and entered a world of sin and sinners and he lived as one of us. That love made him our brother.

He did all that so that we can indeed be part of his family. The writer to the Hebrews says that by the grace of God he tasted death for everyone. It says that in bringing us to glory it was fitting that Jesus was made perfect through suffering. Now what does that mean? The Greek word used here really speaks of reaching your goal. Without suffering, Jesus couldn't finish his work. He couldn't be our Savior. So God did what was necessary. God sent Jesus to suffer and die on a cross. And Jesus loved us so much that he did that to bring us to glory. To bring us home to heaven. And that's when our reading says, **“Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters.”**

He is not ashamed of us. Not matter how embarrassing we sinners would be if we attended a party in heaven, no matter how many times we've put ourselves and our selfish need to look good to the people of this world ahead of our relationship with him, no matter how many times we've failed to reflect his love and make the members of our church feel like family, no matter how many times we just weren't interested in being a part of his family here – Jesus is not ashamed of us. Instead, he overcame all that embarrassing sin. He made us holy in God's sight. That's what the cross was really all about.

To zero in on our congregation, I've seen people drift away from us. I've had conversations with people whose feelings were hurt by something I or someone else in church said or did. We're sinners. We don't always show the kind of love Jesus did. But Jesus loved everyone in our place. Every day that he lived on this earth, he reached out in love to the sinners around him and invited them to be part of his family. That love counts for us. Then Jesus died and he paid for all the times our sin and selfishness hurt those who should be closest to us here. He reached his goal: all the sins of all the world paid for. Then he rose to tell us we are forgiven. He rose to tell us we are holy in God's sight.

And he did that for all of us. Certainly, he did that for us who come to church regularly but forget to make others feel like family here. But he also did for those who don't come. He did it for those people who let the cares and the distractions of this life become more important to them than their church family. He did it for those people who let real hurts and conflicts with people here keep them from their relationship with Jesus here. He did it for the sinful pride in all our hearts that is enraged when people treat *me* badly and that doesn't want to forgive. When those things happen in an earthly family, they tear the members apart. They tear our spiritual family apart, too. But Jesus lived and loved and forgave in the place of all of us. It counts for us. Jesus died and paid for all the times we couldn't or wouldn't let go of the things that keep us away from our family and our God here. His blood washed that sin away, too. Jesus rose to tell us we are still his. He rose to tells us all our sins are gone. He rose to invite us to enjoy the oneness that only he can give with our spiritual family here.

The point is simply this: your home is where you family is. And by the grace of God, our family is Jesus and his family. He gave us that gift. He made us his own. He wants to lift us up and serve us and strengthen us for the long, hard road ahead through this life. And he wants to bring us to our final home in heaven. So **welcome home! Home is where your family is.** This is your spiritual home.

II.

Of course, when I say that, I'm deliberately invoking a warm and welcoming image. That's what home is supposed to be, right? If you grew up in a warm and loving family, that image of home probably works. You think of the smells of Thanksgiving dinner and the memories of spilling out your candy bags after Trick or Treating. You walk into that familiar living room or kitchen and it just feels right. But what if you didn't grow up in a family like that? What if home represents conflict or frustration? What if you've deliberately stayed

away from home for years? In that case, the idea of home might make you feel sad or lonely. It might make you feel like you've missed out on something. Sadly, Christians can feel that way about their spiritual family and their spiritual home. We've already noted that for some of us, this is a place of warmth and welcome, but for some of us, it's been a place of disappointment and sadness.

What has been your experience? What have you made this place and this spiritual family to be for other people? Welcome Home Sunday is about asking ourselves those questions. It's about the need that we have for a spiritual home. And it's about what makes this place our home. Let's start with that. What makes this our spiritual home? I hope that everything that I've said this morning makes that clear: Jesus is here. Jesus makes us his brothers and sisters. Jesus died and rose and gave us faith. Jesus is the key. If he is your brother – and he is – then this is your family, whether it's been a warm and close experience for you or a disappointing one.

The reading from Hebrews emphasizes that when it quotes Jesus speaking in the Old Testament. He said, **“I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters; in the assembly I will sing your praises.”** Jesus declares God's name – which is Bible speak for teaching us to know God's love and forgiveness – to his own brothers and sisters. Jesus teaches us to know the one who loved us and sent his Son to bring us into his eternal family. And where does Jesus do that? Here. “In the assembly.” Jesus is here with us today and every time we gather around his word and sacrament. And even if we sinners allow this to be a congregation where none of us ever touches each other, Jesus will be here as long as his gospel is here. So coming to see him is always coming home.

But God forgive us if we commit the sin of letting this be a loveless and cold place. God forgive us if we don't all strive to make this a family that truly does care about each other. Welcome Home Sunday is a chance for all of us to repent of our failures to make Peace a true family under God. That starts right here in the front with me as your pastor and with the teachers we've called and the leaders we've elected. It includes all of us who come here regularly and fail to notice and reach out to those who don't feel loved or appreciated. And it extends to those who haven't made this family a priority in their own lives. For every time we have failed to treasure the gift of a spiritual home, for every time we have failed to foster a spirit of love and family under God here, we ask our God for forgiveness. Know this my friends: in Christ, that forgiveness is ours. Jesus died. Jesus rose. Jesus has carried all that sin and failure away.

And he calls us to rededicate ourselves to creating an atmosphere of family under Christ here. But that dedication won't come from me pounding away at you and telling you to do better. It comes from knowing the brother who loves us. Today we want to encourage all the members of our family – those who have come regularly in the past and those who haven't – to recognize the opportunity we have to come home to Jesus here. When I was growing up, my great-grandmother loved to have us come to her home. She really loved to host holiday dinners. I have these memories of sitting at her dinner room table while she fluttered about. The table would almost be creaking from the weight of all the food she had prepared and then she'd say, “Oh, we need a little bread.” And she'd run into the kitchen and put bread on plate. I always wondered why, since we had mashed potatoes and peas and dumplings and everything else. Who wanted bread? Grandma made sure we were fed when we came to her house. Even if it was just for an hour after school, she fed us. When we come home to Jesus, he feeds us. He feeds us with the gospel of forgiveness and his promises of life and love. He feeds us and sustains our faith and lifts up our hearts. He even teaches us to love each other, just like my brothers and sister and I learned to love each other at grandma's dinner table and at mom and dad's. That is what we want to remember here. **Welcome home! Home is filled with blessings.** We are home with Jesus here. Amen.