

Dear Christian friends,

At the risk of belaboring a point, let me say yet again: Welcome Home! For some of you this morning, those words just give you the warm fuzzies, huh? This place just *feels* like home. You're comfortable, you know people. It feels like family here. You may even have received a hug or today this morning.

For others, it might not be quite the same. You may feel like a stranger, an outcast, on the fringe, maybe even not wanted. "Home?" You might ask. "No, this place doesn't feel like home...or at least, not anymore."

And as difficult as it is to understand each other's perspective, that's the sad reality. Because as much as this has been a place of forgiveness and comfort and rejoicing, it has also been a place of sin and hurt and heartache. And it is good to understand that as we get together this day, we are gathering with family, our spiritual family, God's family. Which means that whether this place feels like home to you or not, this *is* home. Not your home. Not my home. God's home. And because it's God's home and you are part of God's family, regardless of where you're coming from, you are *always* welcome.

And it's all laid out for us in our second reading for today from Hebrews chapter 2. I'll sum it up with verse 11 ***he who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified all have one Father.***

You see, that makes Jesus our brother. Yes, *the* Jesus, the Son of God and Son of Man, the one born in Bethlehem and crucified on a cross, and risen from the dead, and living and ruling eternally, all for you and me, his sisters and brothers, his *family*.

Now, I don't know about you, but my family tree is pretty much a stick. But even so, like every family, the apple doesn't have to fall very far from the tree, before you get to that family member that the rest of the family, you know, doesn't like to talk about. Oh, and I should probably point out

that, if you don't have a family member like that, well, it's probably you.

Actually, it is you, and it is me. In fact, it's all of us. Because while you and I have to excuse our own families with "well, you can pick your friends but you can't pick you're family," Jesus, our brother, willingly, lovingly, picked you and me to be his. Our reading puts it way-nicely, ***We look to Jesus (the one who was made lower than the angels for a little while...)***

And while ***a little lower than the angels*** doesn't sound too bad, the truth, is that Jesus went dumpster-diving to be with you and me, his family. He left his perfect Triune Family in a pristine, sinless heaven, to be born into the dumpster called earth to search through the filth and rubbish of this fallen world to find you. This wasn't just some quick dive for a few minutes or even an extended weekend. No, this mind-numbing, divinity-offending, life-taking experience was 24-7-365 for 33 years ***so that by God's grace he might taste death for everyone...leading [you] to glory...through sufferings.*** Literally, Jesus' suffering was made "perfect through what he suffered, and in so doing, became your complete savior, bringing you, literally, "to the goal" of the eternal and glorious home for which our heavenly Father has always intended you. ***For he who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified all have one Father.***

***For that reason, he is not ashamed to call [you family.]*** I mean, he would have every right to be ashamed of me, to deny me, to shun me, even. But he doesn't. In fact, he's proud of you and me. ***He says: I will declare your name to my brothers. Within the congregation I will sing your praise.***

And he is, right here this morning, ***within the congregation***, singing praises. Even as we sing his praises, he joins us in singing praises to our heavenly Father. Just as we will sing together, at the close of our service today, "So with one voice we'll sing to the Lord; and with one heart we'll live out his Word."

Yes, live out his Word. Because you see, Jesus is here with his family to do more than be worshipped by us and worship with us. He is here to give to us – to give to us his forgiveness so we need never fear his anger, to assure us with the promise of eternal life that we need never fear death, and to strengthen us that we need never fear temptation. After all, *since the children share flesh and blood,<sup>[e]</sup> he also shared the same flesh and blood, so that through death he could destroy the one who had the power of death (that is, the Devil)<sup>15</sup> and free those who were held in slavery all their lives by the fear of death.* He became like you and me *in every way, in order that he would be a merciful and faithful...so that he could pay<sup>[e]</sup> for the sins of the people.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, because he suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.* And help he does through his life-saving, heart-strengthening, soul-nourishing message of sins forgiven and heaven assured.

Just look at the example we have before us this morning – the life-saving, heart-strengthening, soul nourishing of sins forgiven and heaven assured through body and blood, the bread and wine, the *feast* of Holy Communion. Like the old Italian mamma who, the moment you walk in the door, cries *mangia! Mangia! – Eat! Eat!* – our brother Jesus, when we enter his house,, insists on feeding our very hearts and souls, providing us with the nourishment we need to live our lives of faith in thanksgiving for all that our brother has done for us. Through this meal we receive the forgiveness of sins, a fresh start to new life in Jesus, and the certain promise of eternal life...all for you...all because you're family...all because you're here...at home!

You see, that's why, later in this same book of Hebrews, we are encouraged to not give up meeting together...here...at home. As our first reading today pointed out, we need each other. As we gather around the gospel in Word and Sacrament we can experience the wonder and warmth, the peace and power, levity and love, of God at work in our fellow believers.

But let's be clear with each other, wonder and warmth, peace and power, levity and love isn't everyone's experience here at New Life, or any other earthly church, for that matter. In earthly gatherings like this, for all that shines in God's Word, we cover the light when we allow our personal agendas, our attacking actions, our critical comments give this home of God a weak, uncaring family feel. We may not realize it when we're doing it, but we've all felt it at one time or another. We all want a warm, caring church to come home to week in and week out.

But Personal connections and pervasive positivity have to be cultivated. They take work. We have to be willing to ask ourselves, "Have my words, my actions, my apathy, made someone feel unwelcome in this divine home?" We have to be willing to repent of our selfishness, seek forgiveness, and find assuredness that even as our loving Lord forgives us, we can look for opportunities show his loving kindness to the rest of our church family. Who is hurting? Who needs help? How can I serve? What can I do?

It is this attitude of love and service to our sisters and brother which perpetuates the kind of home we *all* long for. It is a place where we can find encouragement as we face an increasingly hostile world. We can find joy in our sorrow, hope in our despair, and help in our struggles...all for you...all because you're family...all because you're here...at home!

You know, people often ask, "Can someone be a Christian without going to church?" Technically, of course, someone could be a Christian without going to church. But if we are truly reflecting to the rest of our church family and our community the free forgiveness, true selflessness, the loving kindness of our big brother Jesus...who would want to? No, it is our prayer this day, throughout this Welcome Home series in the coming weeks, indeed, every week, that you'd find in our family, in God's family, a welcome home now and forever. Amen.