

### **Theme**

The theme for this Sunday and this sermon is *Welcome Home*. Our prayer is that God's Word might remind God's people that, as Christians, we are family—Jesus is our brother and our fellow Christians are our brothers and sisters. Sadly, we easily forget this reality. And sadly, for many of our fellow family members, congregational life does not feel like home. On this day we pray the Holy Spirit would renew and restore congregations to be the families his Word says they are.

### **Introduction**

“Welcome Home!” A pastor might open his sermon with these words, followed by, “Does this place feel like home to you? Some of you would, no doubt, answer ‘Yes! This is where I am comfortable. This place feels like a warm hug.’ Others of you, though, might answer, ‘Home? This is supposed to feel like home? It’s never felt that way to me! I feel like a stranger. Sometimes, I even feel like I am not wanted. No, this place doesn’t feel anything like home to me!’” Words to this effect set up the sermon to announce the reality that when we gather for worship, we are home because we are with our spiritual family. They also allow the sermon to address the reality that many Christians feel alienated from their Christian family.

### **Where your brother promises to be**

In Hebrews 2 we are told something remarkable, namely, that the eternal God of the universe is our brother. Lest we underestimate the enormity of this reality, we do well to remember just who this brother of ours is. The writer spent chapter 1 of his letter underscoring Christ's divinity. He is:

- The “heir of all things” (1:2)
- “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (1:3)
- “sustaining all things by his powerful word” (1:3)
- The one about whom the Father says, “Let all God’s angels worship him” (1:6)
- The one about whom the Father says, “Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever” (1:8)
- The one about whom the Father says, “In the beginning, Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands” (1:10)

To think that *this one* counts himself as our brother is mind-blowing.

Illustration: In the Chevy Chase movie, “Christmas Vacation,” we are introduced to his character’s down-and-out brother-in-law who drives a beat-up Winnebago, his raggedy niece and nephew, and his snarky in-laws. They say you can pick your friends, but you can’t pick your family. And Jesus chooses us as his family? Amazing!

Verse 9 of chapter 2 reminds us of just what this brother of ours was willing to do for us. He humbled himself to the point of being viewed as “*lower than the angels for a little while.*”

The dumpster-diving God leaves his perfect Triune Family in a pristine, sinless heaven, was born into the dumpster called earth to search through the filth and rubbish of this fallen world—for me. He’s the Lord who chose to live with us. He didn’t spend an extended weekend. He spent 33 years of what must have been absolutely mind-numbing existence—a 24 hour revolting experience.

This he did in order that he could “...*(bring) many sons to glory*” (v. 10) Jesus took our sin upon himself and did what we couldn’t do. But we get the forgiveness and holiness we so needed! We bask in Jesus’ glory.

Illustration: Actor Kevin Bacon recounted when his 6-year-old son saw *Footloose* for the first time. He said, “Hey, Dad, you know that thing in the movie where you swing from the rafters of that building? That’s really cool, how did you do that?”

I said, “Well, I didn’t do that part—it was a stunt man.”

“What’s a stunt man?” he asked.

“That’s someone who dresses like me and does things I can’t do.”

“Oh,” he replied and walked out of the room looking a little confused.

A little later he said, “Hey, Dad, you know that thing in the movie where you spin around on that gym bar and land on your feet? How did you do that?”

I said, “Well, I didn’t do that. It was a gymnastics double.”

“What’s a gymnastics double?” he asked.

“That’s a guy who dresses in my clothes and does things I can’t do.”

There was silence from my son, then he asked in a concerned voice, “Dad, what did you do?”

“I got all the glory,” I sheepishly replied.

Our brother, Jesus, not only lived for the people of this world, but he, “*taste(d) death for everyone.*”

Illustration: Think of when you were young, and your brother refused to drink his milk at dinner. Mom insisted that he drink it before he was allowed to go outside and play. By now, the milk was warm and not the least bit pleasant to drink. Who of us would volunteer to drink that big glass of warm milk for our brother to free him from the

dinner table? Very likely very few of us would be willing. In contrast, our brother, Jesus, was willing to drink *death* to the dregs for us. What a brother!

Verse 10 explains that Jesus' suffering was made "perfect through what he suffered."

τελειῶσαι means "to bring to a goal." Without suffering, Jesus would not have been a complete savior. So, it was fitting that God the Father should have him suffer. After all, God's goal was to bring "many sons and daughters to glory." Since the Father's and the Son's wills are in perfect alignment, the Son willingly went along with the suffering.

Verse 11 is the bombshell! "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." Many people are ashamed of their families. Perhaps your father is the town drunk. Perhaps your mother is a mess. Perhaps your sister is known to know too many men. Perhaps your brother has been in trouble with the law more times than you can count. And so, you are ashamed. You are ashamed to admit your relationship. You are concerned with what others will think of you if they know you are related to *him/her*.

If ever there was a brother who had a right to be ashamed of his siblings, it is Jesus. He ought to have disowned us long ago. He ought to hang his head in shame at even knowing us. Were we he, this is surely what we would do. But we are not he. *He* is the one who has made us perfect through his suffering. He is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters because he has made us holy in his sight. He is as proud to call us brothers and sisters as someone whose sibling won a gold medal at the Olympics or was elected to high office. He points to us and says, "*He/she* is my brother/sister!"

"And...he is here with us this morning," the pastor might say in his sermon. "As sure as I am standing in front of you, as sure as that person is seated next to you, *he* is here. Listen again to what our text quotes Jesus as saying to his Father, 'I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters; in the assembly (ἐκκλησία) I will sing your praises.' (v. 12).\*\* Isn't that remarkable? Jesus is joining us in our worship this morning. Even as we praise him, he joins us in praising his Father. [The refrain to our opening hymn (Getty) puts it this way: *So with one voice we'll sing to the Lord; and with one heart we'll live out his Word.*]

No wonder we love to come to this place! Why are there so many families in church on Mothers' Day? It is because children of Christian mothers know that nothing could mean more to her than for them to worship with her. Likewise, nothing could give us more joy than worshiping with our brother, Jesus.

\*\*Excursus: Jesus is quoting Psalm 22:22, a Messianic psalm and the psalm quoted most often in the New Testament. "The Messiah promises to share the good news of his triumph with the assembly of God's children. This promise is fulfilled when Jesus proclaims the gospel in the church. As true man, Jesus became our brother and died for us. Through the gospel he gathers us together as the children of God who will share his glory." (*The People's Bible*, Psalms v1, p110-111.)

Of course, He is here to do more than be worshiped by us and worship with us. He is here to give to us—to give us his forgiveness so we need never fear his anger, to give us the promise of eternal life so that we need never fear death, to give us his strength so that we need never fear

temptation. In verse 18 we are told, “*Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.*”

When my grandmother was alive, there was a standing joke among the grandchildren that you had better not eat before visiting grandma. She seemed incapable of allowing you to walk into her home without giving you something to eat. It was inevitable and it was inevitably good. Our brother treats us the same. When we enter his house, he insists on feeding us. He knows precisely what our needs are and provides the spiritual nourishment to meet those needs. (Here a pastor may want to remind his people of the spiritual blessings that are received in Holy Communion. This is especially pertinent on *Welcome Home* Sunday because it is one of the blessings that cannot be received if one is not an active congregational member. It addresses the oft-uttered claim that “I don’t have to go to church to be a Christian.” If a pastor chooses to point to the blessings of Holy Communion, however, he would want to be careful that he emphasizes the blessings of the Supper (gospel) rather than the threat that “if you aren’t coming to church you’re not getting this” (law).) It was no wonder my grandmother’s grandchildren loved to visit her house. And, it is no wonder Jesus’ brothers and sisters love to visit his house.

### ***Where your brothers and sisters are***

If you were raised in a warm, loving family, the thought of coming home immediately brings joyful thoughts to mind. Some of my strongest memories were arriving home from after-school activities to the smell of fresh-baked bread and beef roast. My mom would just be finishing the mashed potatoes when we walked in the door. Within minutes we would sit down to a feast. My folks still live in that same house. And, I still look forward to visiting them there. Whether it is for a family Christmas party or just a quick “hello,” walking into that house feels warm and wonderful.

But not everyone was raised in such an environment. The thought of their childhood home brings feelings of sadness or loneliness or lovelessness.

In the same way, some Christians have had wonderful experiences in God’s house. They have found caring and supportive brothers and sisters in Christ. They have found warmth and welcome. But, others have not. They have experienced unloving attitudes and actions. Their congregation has never felt like home.

Sidebar: This might be a place to acknowledge that a weak “family feel” in the congregation might be from an extension of our culture’s tendency toward isolation—rather than from some overt unloving attitude or action. Some people don’t know their neighbors. They leave for work, closing the garage by remote, and return to the same cocoon in the evening. Some people don’t connect with others at Sunday worship. They come and go with a degree of anonymity—or at least without a deep connection to others. Younger generations who place a higher value on “authenticity” might view this as a special liability. Whatever our cultural weaknesses or blind spots, the rest of the congregation is still family—maybe feeling more like distant cousins than brothers and sisters. But we do care—and want to improve our caring—for those cousins.

Compare early church compassion for “distant cousins.” For example, poor Macedonians showing rich generosity to the famine-stricken in Judea.

This is why *Welcome Home* Sunday affords us the opportunity to repent of our sins against our brothers and sisters in Christ. We beg forgiveness from Christ and from one another for every unkind thought, every hurtful word, every self-serving action. Were we upset about something so silly as how to do this or that? Were we simply too selfish to consider how our words or actions impacted others? Were we too busy serving ourselves to think of how we might serve those around us? For all of the ways we have failed to be the brothers and sisters God has called us to be, we repent.

And, even as our loving Lord assures us of his forgiveness, we look for opportunities to show his kind of love and forgiveness to the fellow members of our church family. Who is hurting? Who needs help? How can I serve? What can I do?

This attitude of love and service to our brothers and sisters creates the kind of home we all long for. It is a place where we can find encouragement as we face an increasingly hostile world, hope when we feel hopeless, and help when we feel helpless.

As today’s first reading from Ecclesiastes put it: *“Two are better than one.... If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up.... A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.”* We are not wired to exist as rugged individuals. We need one another. God has designed us to be this way, and God’s design is for us to be family in Christ.

People often ask if someone can be Christian without going to church. Technically, of course, they could. There are those who are, for a variety of reasons, unable to be active in a Christian congregation. But, when we consider who is here when we gather as we are this morning—our brother Jesus and our Christian brothers and sisters—we might answer this question by saying, “Who would want to?” It would be a bit like me asking if I can be a member of my family without ever visiting my parents’ home. Technically, the answer is “yes.” But, I can’t for the life of me imagine why I would want to.

### **Closing**

A possible conclusion to this message would be to share an example from a pastor’s ministry (without using names) of a person, perhaps a shut-in, who is unable to come to the Lord’s house to worship and who is terribly sad that they cannot. The story can be used to encourage worshipers to be thankful for, and be sure to take advantage of, their ability to gather with their Brother and their brothers and sisters.

Another possible conclusion could be to point to Revelation 21 and its breathtaking description of the new heaven and new earth, the home of righteousness, where we will finally be gathered together for eternity—the perfect fulfillment of the foretaste that we experience when we are gathered in worship.