

That was quite a sermon! The Book of Hebrews is really more like a sermon than a letter. It was written to challenge people to remain strong in their faith in Jesus, who suffered and died, and thereby conquered the powers of sin and death, so that we can be made holy and become a part of the Family of God!

What an awesome thought! – that we are becoming God’s Family, being prepared by the Lord for holy living that never ends. Are **you** preparing?

The sermon to the Hebrews, as we might call it, begins by declaring unequivocally that God has spoken to humanity through Jesus his Son. Now, God has spoken through other people, too. Hebrews 1:1 – God spoke to our ancestors through prophets at many times and in various ways. But now he has sent his Son, through whom he made the universe. There is no question in the mind of the Hebrews preacher – (1:3) *“The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being.”* Or, as I sometimes tell membership classes, Jesus is a “chip off the old block” – that’s what it means to say that he is the Son of God. In Jesus we see who God is and how God acts (with mercy and compassion and yet also confronting spiritual fakes and weeping over violent cities). Jesus is superior to angels! Superior to any other messenger from God. Angels are merely “bearers” of God’s message. The Son is “God himself” come to be among human beings. God no longer sends a message through someone else. In Jesus, God comes to speak directly to us and to live out his call to repent of sin and receive his saving grace.

This is an important message, because there were among those first Hebrew Christians some who thought Jesus might have been an angel. And this sermon wants the Hebrews to know without a doubt that Jesus was not an angel. He is far, far more than an angel. Jesus is the glorious, exact fullness of God. At the same time, Jesus is the very heart of God who cares so much about us human beings who have been made *“a little lower than the angels”* that he becomes one of us and then leads the way into the glory and honor to which God is calling us. In other words, Jesus is both far above the angels and also takes on a status less than the angels – all for the purpose of *“bringing many sons [and daughters] to glory,”* (as 2:10 declares). He is most definitely not “just an angel.”

The whole point of the book of Hebrews is to make clear (2:11) that *“the one who makes men holy”* comes to show *“the ones who are made holy”* [that’s you and me] that we and he are *“of the same family.”* To do this (2:14), Jesus *“shared in [our] humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”*

Is that what Jesus is doing for *you*? Setting you free from your fear of dying?
Setting you free from the power of the devil?

We sometimes avoid talking about the devil, as if everything evil that happens is a result of our own bad choices. And it is probably good if we don’t sit around blaming the devil for everything, but actually take responsibility to do something about the evils in our lives and in this world. But I would remind us of all those times when we realize that we were doing the best we knew how to do and things still went sour, something got fouled up, bad decisions messed up more things that we could have imagined possible. There is a force of evil at work.

Sometimes we feel evil temptations welling up within ourselves. As 1 Peter 5:8 admonishes us, *“Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are going through the same kind of sufferings.”* We are responsible to stand firm against temptations. But sometimes we cannot do much because the devouring is being done by forces beyond our control – mean-spirited people, or invading viruses and diseases, or accidents. And when we suffer from destructive forces that we cannot control, it is easy to become afraid.

The devil gains power over us when he is able to make us afraid ... most particularly to make us feel hopeless and helpless. When we sink into dark depths of guilt and shame, believing that God must no longer love us because of our failures; or when we boil over in fear and hatred of others for what they are doing to us, then we are help captive by the powers that bring death.

God knows we need someone who understands our dilemma! And that is why, the Hebrews preacher declares, God sent his Son to suffer alongside us. As Hebrews

4:15 declares, *“For we do not have a high priest [meaning Jesus as the one who prays for us] who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”* That’s what the final verse of today’s reading (2:18) also declares: *“Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”*

Quite a sermon, isn’t it? Declaring that the power of the Temptor – power to make us die because of our sins ... that power is broken! The devil’s days are numbered – he is destroyed by the One who takes on our weakness and human frailties and dies in innocence, as an *“atonement for the sins of the people,”* Hebrews 2:17 says. The alternate translation for that verse (see footnote) says, *“that he might turn aside God’s wrath, taking away the sins of the people.”* He makes us “one with God” – that’s what “atonement” means. Makes us become “family” with God. Jesus makes us “one with God” and therefore unravels the toxic fear by which the devil would have caused us to separate ourselves away from God by groveling in guilt and shame or by turning against others in rage and vengeance.

Whole semesters of theology could be taught on just this portion of the sermon to the Hebrews! Just remember that his main point is to remind us that the Son of God has taken on our human frailties and suffered a human death in order to destroy the powers of the devil and to set us free from our fears so that we may become holy and follow him all the way into the glorious presence of the Majesty of God.

The net result is that we realize that we are *“of the same family”* together with Jesus. That’s what Hebrews 2:11 says: *“Both the one who makes men holy and those are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers.”*

Are you firmly convinced that Jesus is not ashamed to call **you** his brother/sister – not ashamed to call you “family”?

And are you equally convinced that Jesus is not ashamed to call **every other human being** “family”?

Now it’s true that those who are said to be *“of the same family”* with the Son of God are *“those who are made holy.”* So the question can be asked, whether we are

allowing the Lord to make us holy – whether we are allowing Jesus to turn us away from the temptations and evils of this world so that we become “different,” “set apart” for a different way of living – which is really what “holy” means: “purified and set apart for godly purposes.” Are **you** being made holy by Jesus? Are you helping **others** become holy in this way – inviting everyone to join in pursuing “a different way of living”?

That is one of the phrases of our heritage, you know. When the identity statement was put together for our denomination, it began with this phrase: “a different way of living.” “*A different way of living – continuing the work of Jesus peacefully, simply, together.*” And all who join in that “different way of living” – whatever race or tribe or nation they may belong to – absolutely anyone who joins in the holy way of living to which Jesus calls us becomes “family” to us ... as together we become “family” to God. We unite in the common work of making God’s Creation holy through the saving grace of Jesus.

Our congregation’s purpose statement begins with this same affirmation, as noted in the sub-title for today’s sermon: “*We are a **family** of Christians committed to following Jesus.*” And that experience of being family for each other, indeed of acting like family toward everyone around us, is crucial.

During one of the worship services at NOAC (our denomination’s National Older Adult Conference, held in North Carolina last month), several women portrayed women of India and showed the impact that can occur when each person is treated as a sister/brother in the family of God. It was a skit about Heifer Project, describing how widows – who would have been left to poverty and death in that culture since they no longer had a husband – found opportunity to sustain themselves through the gift of a goat ... and then helped sustain others by sharing with someone else the first born of their goat. Including a *dalit* woman – one of the untouchables caste – who became the friend of a wealthy widow, as they crossed the barriers imposed by their society to care for each other as they raised their goats.

I was reminded of that skit as I read a quote in *Homiletics*, a journal that I study as I prepare my sermons. The quote is from an article by Mark Labberton (in *Leadership*, Spring 2007): “*Dalits* (Untouchables) in India are required by Hindu law to be given one name, and it must be derogatory: Ugly, Dung, Stupid. Imagine the transformation when they discover that in Jesus, God came as a *dalit* ..., and that he

has the power to rename them: Chosen. Holy. Beloved.” And my thought was – *how* does Jesus rename people? Answer: it is through his brothers and sisters – you and me – as we let others know that they are “chosen,” “holy,” “beloved” – invited to be family with us and with God.

All of my life, I have been taught to respect everyone, most particularly to respect the people whom other people disrespect. If someone in my class had difficulty speaking or walking, my parents would ask if I had gone out of my way to help them feel included and appreciated and loved. It was a part of being “Brethren” – of treating everyone as a brother or sister. And it felt good to have a special mission in life, different from how other people lived.

This week is Mental Illness Awareness week. 20% of the population experience some form of mental illness, I read. One out of every five people! 5-6% struggle with serious mental illness. Are we able to help those who suffer illnesses of the mind the way that we would help those who suffer illnesses of the body? Can we help them feel like family? How might we let each person know that we recognize his/her value as an individual person, as a precious, unique Creation of God?

This is not on the periphery of Christian living. It is at the heart of the Gospel – Jesus commissions us to make disciples of every kind of people, inviting them to join us in learning to follow all that Jesus has taught us, to become holy and loving along with us, so that together we might be the family of Jesus in God’s Kingdom for ever.

We live in a world that is constantly tempted to do the exact opposite – a world where people often talk about “looking out for #1,” meaning themselves and their own kind. A documentary aired yesterday showed the history of how the Ku Klux Klan has bedeviled white people into thinking of themselves more highly than others, even to wish to do away with non-white people. The KKK’s efforts to intimidate and terrorize have been exposed now and again, and the movement dies down for a time, but then white supremacy rears its ugly head once again. Somehow people begin to think it’s okay to trounce others in order to provide for themselves. The movement even cloaks itself in Christian symbolism and patriotic language. But the self-centeredness becomes demonic and unleashes fear and death, the exact opposite of the Christian faith as declared clearly in the scriptures.

Be very, very wary of people who tell you to take care of yourself at the expense of others. They will lead you to *betray* the cross.

Practice lovingkindness toward all of the peoples God has created. Realize that Jesus was sent precisely for the purpose of bringing as many as possible into the glory of God's Kingdom – a wonderful gathering of all of God's family, where as the vision of John's Revelation 7:9 declares, there will be *"a great multitude that no one [can] count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb, [wearing] white robes [symbols of purity – having been made holy by Jesus] ... [crying] out in a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'"*

This evening we will practice this lovingkindness to which Jesus calls us as his brothers and sisters. We will stoop to wash each other's feet. I hope *you* will be among us. It is one of the things that Jesus tells us to do. *"Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet" (John 13:14).* But it is more than simply obeying a command; it is entering into a *different way of living* – learning to care for all of God's people, being willing to do what others would be embarrassed to do, in order to show everyone that we are "family" together in Christ.

We will also eat together around tables, as a family of Christians. We will declare that we want to love one another the way that Jesus first loved us. And we welcome to our table any one who earnestly wants to follow Jesus, too. **You** are welcome to come and celebrate Love Feast with us.

We will close by breaking the bread and drinking the cup that represent Christ's death upon the cross, the death by which he took upon himself the temptations and sins and evils for which the devil would make us die, but from which Jesus sets us free in order to make us holy so that we may be brothers and sisters together with all of God's family! It is *Worldwide Communion Sunday*. Come, join with Christians around the world to celebrate the Life-giving grace of Jesus. Be made holy ... as we celebrate Jesus, whose death on the cross makes clear that he is not ashamed to call any of us his "brother," his "sister" – his *"Family!"*

Hymn 322 *For We Are Strangers No More*