

We are Family!

I. God's Family

II. The Mount Olive Family

°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 to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering. ¹¹ Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers. ¹² He says, "I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises." ¹³ And again, "I will put my trust in him." And again he says, "Here am I, and the children God has given me." ¹⁴ Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—¹⁵ and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. ¹⁶ For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. ¹⁷ For this reason he had to be made like his brothers 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. ¹⁸ Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

Okay, pop quiz for you, as in, popular culture. Can anyone tell me the name of this musical group? I realize that this may date you a little bit. This is kind of a blast from the past. The name of this group is what? Raise your hand if you know. This is the pop group Sister Sledge. And some of you already know why I put this band up here. Because when you came into to church today and saw them for our service today, you started humming the one song that this band made famous. Am I right? Sister Sledge sang, "We are Family. I got all my sisters with me." (It might take the whole service to get that tune out of your head now.)

But you realize, that idea, that "we are family" did not originate with an R&B band from the '70s. No, thousands of years before Sister Sledge, God the Holy Spirit was already applying that concept to the church, both the Holy Christian Church, the invisible body of all believers, but also to the local gatherings of the believers around God's Word and Sacrament. God says that when men women and children are united to Christ, they become united to each other. They become members of one family. And that, my friends, is what we want to celebrate today. Today we celebrate the powerful truth that by the grace of God and the call of the Holy Spirit,

We Are Family!

Today, we'll focus on two rather interconnected families:

I. God's family.

II. The Mount Olive family.

First, God's family. So, tell me, exactly who belongs to God's family? Well, St. Paul answers that questions for us when he writes in Galatians 3:26, *You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus*. You realize what that means, don't you? It means that not a single one of us was born into God's family. When you and I came into this world as screaming little babies, we

weren't born believers. We were born unbelievers. We were born not into God's family, but into Satan's family.

But then what happened? God had pity on us. Through the washing of holy baptism, God adopted us into his family—not because we were cute, cuddly little babies. No, we were sinners. God adopted us purely because of his undeserved love and mercy. The Bible says that God gave us *the spirit of adoption*. (Romans 8:15). With our baptismal certificate he gave us, in effect, a new birth certificate. A certificate that reads, “This child, (fill in your own name), is born again. This child, by God's grace, through the faith worked by the Holy Spirit, now belongs to God’s Family.

Do you realize what an awesome thing that is? Just let that sink in a minute. You are a member of God's family. I mean, God the almighty, the creator of the universe, has chosen to make you a member of his holy, royal family. You realize, that's not true of every human being. It's not like everyone is automatically a child of God. No, what did Saint Paul say? *You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus*. It is only because God the Holy Spirit planted saving faith in your heart that you can say, “I belong. I belong to the family of God.”

But you know what else that means? It means that since God has made you his child, it means he's also made Jesus your brother. Isn't that what the writer to the Hebrews says here in our text? *Both the one who makes men holy* (that would be Jesus), *and those who are made holy* (that would be you and me as Christians), *are of the same family. And so Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers* (or sisters, as the case may be).

Again, please don't overlook what an amazing thing that is. Jesus is your brother. No, not the older brother who used to pick on you when you were a kid or the younger brother who was always kind of a pest. Jesus is your perfect brother. He is the brother who can perfectly empathize with everything you are going through in life and then has the ability to rescue you from the eternal consequences of your failures in life.

Isn't that the point that the writer to the Hebrews makes in our text for today? *For this reason, Jesus had to be made like his brothers 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*. But notice what else he says about Jesus, *Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted*. (Hebrews 2:18)

Notice, Jesus is able to help those who are being tempted. Isn't that one of the greatest blessings of being a member of God's family? Sometimes I think we're tempted to think that if we are really a member of God's family, we'd better not have any sins that we're struggling with. We have a certain image to keep up. There are certain things that good Christians just never do. Certain temptations that Christians just never fall for. But that kind of thinking ignores what this verse says. Jesus became our perfect brother, not so he could shun us when we fall into sin, but so that he can rescue us from the guilt and shame that comes with that sin. He became our brother so that he could help us in our time of temptation.

Isn't that one of the things that unites us as members of God's family? It's not like we qualified for God's family on the basis of our perfect lives. No, we qualified by being sinners. And it shows in our lives. It shows in the people around us. But Jesus never stops holding out his arms to us. He says, “I forgive you. I still love you. In my family,” Jesus says, “there is no such thing as a black sheep. Because of my blood and righteousness, you are all equally loved, equally precious, equally holy in the eyes of our heavenly father.”

Thanks be to God that by God's grace, through the faith he's worked in your heart, you now belong to God's family, a family that includes believers from around the globe. The Bible

calls that family the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints. It's all the people in heaven and on earth, who trust in Jesus as their savior, regardless of denomination they belong to or what congregation they attend. Your God-given faith in Jesus Christ, has put you (and me) in the most important family of all, and that is, God's family.

But that's not the only family that we belong to. God has also put us in a second family, a visible assembly of people gathered around God's Word and Sacrament. That family is called II. the Mount Olive family.

Now I suppose someone might say, "Is it all that important to be part of a church family like Mount Olive? I mean, as long as I believe in Jesus, as long as I'm a member of God's family, does it really matter whether I'm a member of a local congregation of believers? I can be a Christian without being in a Christian congregation, can't I? I guess, theoretically, that's possible. The thief on the cross became a Christian in his dying hour, without necessarily belonging to a local congregation. And yet, once he came to know Jesus as his savior, if he could have gotten down from that cross, do you think you would have wanted to get together with other people who has experienced that same grace of God that he had experienced in Christ? I think he would have. Why? For the same reason that families get together. 1. To eat together. 2. To encourage one another. And 3. To make sure no one gets lost.

Isn't that right? What do families do when they get together at Thanksgiving or Christmas? We eat. Isn't the same thing true for the Mount Olive family? I'm not talking about the occasional potluck dinner or tailgate party. I'm talking about the spiritual meal that we gather to eat each week. A feast of God's word and sacrament which alone can keep our faith alive and growing. And while we can and should help ourselves to bites of the living bread throughout the week, isn't there something to be said for letting someone, like a called minister of the gospel, prepare a special meal to nourish our faith, which we can then enjoy in the company of our brothers and sisters in Christ? Whether it's in a corporate worship service, or a large or small group Bible study—one of the reasons that Christians gather together is so that they can eat together.

But there is another reason that a family like Mount Olive gathers together. And that is to encourage one another. Isn't that right? A little bit later in the book of Hebrews, the writer speaks about the importance of Christians gathering together, when he writes, *Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day (namely, Judgment Day) approaching.* The Greek word there translated as encourage one another, is an interesting word. Literally, it means "to call to one's side". It's the picture of what a coach does for his player. He calls the player to his side and tells that young man or woman what that player needs to hear. Maybe the coach tells him what he's doing wrong, in an attempt to get him back on track. Or maybe the kid already knows what he did wrong. He's already hurting. So the coach takes the opposite approach. He puts his arm around him and says, "Hey, it's okay. You still belong on this team. I've got your back. Now go get 'em." Both of those conversations would fall under the category of giving encouragement. And that's what God says the church gathers together for, namely, to encourage one another.

You see that happening here at Mount Olive, don't you? When someone comes up to you after church and says "So, how was your week?" Or, "What's new with your kids?"—that's designed to be an encouragement to you. When your church family prays for you when you are in the hospital. When someone sends you a card after you lost a loved one, they are encouraging you. In fact, even their presence in a worship service like this is an encouragement to you, and you to them. I mean, tell me that it doesn't feel good to have so many of your fellow members in

worship with you today.

But there's one more reason that Christians gather into families like Mount Olive. And that's to do our best to keep people from getting lost. Isn't that the way it goes with our natural families? I can remember, after my wife and I had our second child, we started saying a lot more often, "Okay, do we have everybody?" And we only had two kids! I can only imagine what it would be like for parents with four or five children. No wonder they're literally counting heads whenever they get in the car. "Okay, do we have everybody? They don't want to lose anyone.

My friends, isn't the same thing true for this family? Mount Olive is one really large family. We have a lot of God's children in this family, children of all ages, from 9 days old to 99 years old. And every one of them runs the risk of getting lost. Typically, it doesn't happen overnight. It's usually kind of a gradual process. It starts when somebody says, "I don't really know anybody at church anymore. When I go to church, nobody knows me. When I don't go to church, nobody misses me. I'm not sure I really belong in that family. And the next thing you know, they are not only disconnected from the Mount Olive family. They may well be separated from God's family. By losing their connection to the regular distribution of God's word and sacrament, they lose their connection to Christ. Faith that is not regularly fed, ultimately dies.

But you realize, it doesn't have to be that way. Why not? Because, remember, We Are Family. God has joined us together with the bonds of his love. That means we have a certain responsibility for the people in our family, even if we don't know them that well. They are still our brothers and sisters in Christ. It kind of reminds me of that old movie, *The Parent Trap*. Do you remember that, where the two girls don't realize that they are sisters until they figure out that they both have the same father? Isn't the same thing true for you and me? Here at Mount Olive you may well be sitting next to someone you don't know, until you realize that you have the same Father, in heaven, and the same brother, Jesus Christ. You know what that makes you? It makes you siblings. You're members of the same family.

Well, today is the day for all of us to celebrate that fact. To celebrate that God has made us all members of one family. A day to kind of connect with the people around us, or maybe reconnect with them. Does God want us to build a relationship this way (vertically) with him here at Mount Olive? You bet he does. But he also wants us to build relationships this way (horizontally) with each other here at Mount Olive. Because that's what families do. They care for each other, they encourage each other, and they do everything possible to make sure that no one gets lost.

My friends, today we had the first ever Mount Olive family reunion. But I have a feeling it won't be the last. In fact, we've already scheduled one for next week, and the week after that. For that's what families do. We gather to feed our faith, with the Word and the Sacrament. We gather to encourage and be encouraged by one another. And we'll do it all because, by God's grace, through faith in Jesus Christ... We are Family. To God be the glory! Amen.