A Place to Belong

Final in the Sept. 2017 series of the same name

# Scriptures: Ecc. 4:9-12; Eph. 2:17-22

# Key thought: The family of God is meant to help fill our longing for a circle in which we belong.

# Intro:

## “Where everybody knows your name”

From 1982 to 1993 one of the most famous shows on television was a comedy series called Cheers. The show was set in a friendly bar in Boston Massachusetts where a group of local folks came to relax. If you're old enough, you probably remember a couple of the most loved characters; Frasier Crane played by Kelsey Grammar, Sam Malone played by Ted Danson, Carla, the waitress, played by Rhea Perlman and Rebecca Howe played by Kirstie Allie. But perhaps the most enduring legacy to our culture from that series was the five word refrain of the theme song written by Gary Portnoy, "Where Everybody Knows Your Name." It express a deep longing in everyone's heart to belong. I think it was one of the key reasons why people wanted to watch the show. For the show was simply about the kind of a place that everyone wanted to be, a place "Where Everybody Knows Your Name."

All of us like to be part of a group where we feel at home. We’re looking for a place that fits us like a favorite coat or pair of jeans. We long for a circle of friends that’s as comfortable socially as our favorite chair is physically. We instinctively know that we are stronger when we are together.

Research is affirming our instincts.

According to a research article reported in Medical News Today, loneliness is actually a bigger killer than obesity. Two new meta-analyses from Brigham Young University (BYU) in Provo, Utah, reveal that loneliness and social isolation may increase the risk of premature death up to 50%. Study co-author, and professor of psychology at BYU summarize their findings this way;

"There is robust evidence that social isolation and loneliness significantly increase risk for premature mortality, and the magnitude of the risk exceeds that of many leading health indicators." Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Ph.D. co-author

## Solomon says we need to belong

The writer of the first passage of Scripture that we read from the book of Ecclesiastes was King Solomon who reigned in the nation of Israel about a thousand years BC (971-931 BC -- Introduction to the Old Testament by Roland Kenneth Harrison p. 731). The most important fact about King Solomon was that he was famed for his wisdom. He is known as the wisest man who ever lived other than Jesus himself. His advice that we read agreed that we are stronger together than when we try to go it alone. I think his conclusions can be constructively suggestive to us today.

Solomon’s conclusions, combined with the insights of the apostle Paul in Ephesians, also help us understand some of the great benefits of the family of God. Today people are hesitant to join things. I get that. And I want to assure you up front that I'm not talking about belonging to the family of God in some formal membership sense at all. Certainly formal membership has its place in facilitating the organization of any group including the body of Christ. But that’s not what I’m talking about this morning.

My focus this morning is just on being a part of the action in the assembled family of God; on having a sense of belonging to the group, the friendship circle. I want us to think about experiencing the spiritual care and the accepting embrace of the local church. You see, I think, based on what Jesus taught us about learning to love, that the church is equipped better than any other group to be the kind of friendly place we desire where everybody knows your name. Why do I believe that? Several reasons: Let’s celebrate for a few moments together what the church is all about.

# We draw strength from one another.

## People working together are stronger

The first reason the church is a special circle to be a part of is the way we strengthen one another. The New Century Version of Ecclesiastes 4:9 reads this way, “Two people are better than one, because they get more done by working together.”

When Jesus sent out the disciples to minister in the nation of Israel he sent them out two by two (Mark 6:7). When the Holy Spirit called persons to go on the first great missionary journey, he called two people, Barnabas and Saul, later called Paul, to go as teammates (Acts 13:2). On his second missionary journey Paul departed with Silas as his partner and Barnabas took John Mark to minister with him (Acts 15:39, 40). The early disciples of Jesus learned from Jesus that there is strength in working as a team.

I think this is a universal experience of friendship and of working partnerships of many kinds. There is so much more potential strength in working together. What is that famous acronym for a TEAM? – “Together everyone achieves more!”

## In the church, we are stronger together

In the family of God, we draw not just on the personal strength and talents of one another, but also on the spiritual strength of one another. As I mentioned in a message a few weeks ago, when we are finding it hard to pray for ourselves, we can reach out to a friend in Christ who will pray for us. We can urge one another on toward good deeds as Scripture tells us to do (Heb. 10:24).

# We find support in our times of need.

## What happens when things don’t go so well?

A second reason why I see being a part of the family of God as so wholesome and rewarding has to do with what happens when everything is not going so well.

I read about one of those famous Calvin and Hobbes cartoons. In the first frame, Calvin gets dressed in some of his special clothes and goes off to school. He gets to school and right off, sits down on some bubble gum. Then he gets beat up by the class bully. Next up he fails a test, and as if that weren’t enough, on the way home he gets rained on. At bedtime he says to his friend Hobbes, “You know, Hobbes, some days even your lucky rocketship underpants don’t help.”

I think we can all relate. We have all had days like that. Let’s check in with Solomon again as he comments on the wisdom of belonging when things aren’t going so well. Speaking of two friends, he says,

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. Eccl 4:10 NIV

So one of the great benefits of being a part of the family of God is finding support in one another. As Solomon implies, “Pity the one who has no one to help him or her up emotionally on those lowest days when everything seems to be going south.”

## In the family of God we carry each other’s burdens

Thankfully, the Bible encourages us in the family of God:

Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.
Gal 6:2 NIV

We experience the result of this attitude in the church family when we are hurting. Others come to our aid. The church can be and should be a very supportive circle when we are hurting. This past winter Carol Griffin had the misfortune to break an ankle. After she finally made it back to church months later, she gave a testimony about how many people helped her in her season of need. Paula Bristol had knee surgery and said that no one had ever brought her prepared food before; but the family of God here did. Many of you have experienced the support of the family of God.

# We experience spiritual warmth in the family of God.

## Solomon’s words prod us to think about spiritual warmth

The third illustration of Solomon in Ecclesiastes about the power of a twosome speaks of how when it is very cold outside, we can draw close to friends to share body warmth. And the wise Solomon asks the rhetorical question, “How can one keep warm alone?” (Eccl 4:11).

When I am out with my wife on a cool fall evening I watch for that signal when she pulls her arms in close as if she is cold. It means she needs to snuggle a little closer. I reach out and put my arm around her. But the greatest warmth that we share comes from our many years in relationship.

So it is with the spiritual warmth that is shared in the family of God. As I was preparing this message about the benefits of the family of God, I was asking myself, “So what is different about the church from any other good caring social circle that one might belong to?” It’s a fair question. And it deserves a thoughtful answer.

I came up with three key differences. I think they help us understand the kind of spiritual warmth that is shared in the family of God.

## The family of God has a deeper spiritual unity

First of all, belonging in the family of God is not just about a social connection to one another. It is primarily about having a common connection to Jesus.

Did you ever have a friend who had another friend and then you and the other friend became friends because you were both friends of the first friend? Well, that’s the way it is with all of us in the family of God. Our deepest reason for being friends is that underneath it all, we have all become followers of Jesus. Together, we are all friends of Jesus. And that friendship is transformative.

### Each of us is made spiritually alive as we believe in Jesus and open our hearts to him

There’s something very special, very heartwarming, very quickening about being in relationship with Jesus Christ. And when we have that relationship in common it is even more awesome.

The Apostle John put it this way,

 He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God John 1:11-12 NIV

So when each one of us individually makes room in our hearts for Jesus, then he supernaturally constitutes us together as his forever spiritual family. That is the basis of the spiritual warmth in the church.

As a part of this family relationship, the Holy Spirit is present in all believers. Paul says;

The Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. Rom 8:15-16 NIV

The spiritual warmth in God’s church was ignited in the fires of Pentecost and still radiates from the body of believers today.

### Jesus is our peace

Paul in Ephesians talks about another reason for our spiritual warmth.

He himself is our peace. Eph. 2:14 NIV

As we said, it is by faith in Jesus’ work that we can have peace with God (Rom 5:1). But secondly, and this is also in Paul’s mind, because we all come to God through Jesus, he provides a basis upon which we can be at peace with one another.

Commentator William Barclay put it this way, “It is in a common love of Him that people come to love each other.” (Commentary on Gal. and Eph. p. 114) So there is added warmth of affection for each other that comes from God’s love communicated to us by the Holy Spirit and helping us to love each other.

## The family of God is continually being renewed in love

### Jesus builds his body of believers up by his presence among them collectively

But there is even more. Paul goes further.

In him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. Eph. 2:22 NIV

As we are all together united in following Jesus, by the Holy Spirit, God works to build us together more deeply. The reason is that He desires to dwell in us by his Spirit, not just individually, but also collectively.

So is it any wonder that we feel that we experience a great spiritual warmth in the family of God! There was an old song refrain that went, “I’m so glad I’m a part of the family of God.” It echoed the feelings of believers everywhere.

## The family of God finds deeper unity in its high purposes

There’s one more reason that I think we find such spiritual fervor and warmth in the family of God. You see, most social groups have a fairly superficial social glue that holds them together. Let’s say everyone in the group plays poker; or everyone likes going out to dinner on Tuesday; or everyone works at Cigna. Such reasons help hold most casual social groups together. But such reasons don’t relate to the rest of participants lives and as soon as that superficial circumstance changes, a person is no longer a part of that social group.

But one of the key underlying unifying factors in the family of God is purpose. The church is on a mission to do the work of Jesus in the world. While it is true that the family of God is one of the best and most fulfilling groups to which one can belong, giving us all warm fuzzy feelings is not its purpose. It has a higher purpose. It is on a mission to reflect Christ in a broken world. We are all here to help others find their way to Jesus. We are here to bring healing and wholeness to the brokenness of our world. We are here to serve a world in need. Being united in this purpose keeps us going together through many vicissitudes of ordinary life. When one person’s ability to do one particular job changes, they are not out, they are still united together with everyone in our common purpose; serving Jesus and doing his work.

# Conclusion

I close with the story of an ordinary Mom, a divorced and unemployed single Mom named MaryBeth who experienced the benefits of the family of God for herself.

MaryBeth’s story --God With Us p. 26

MaryBeth discovered strength, support and spiritual warmth in the family of God. So will you and me.