

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

All the times my wife and I have moved from one part of the country to another, or even from one city to another, I don't recall ever giving any thought to who my neighbors might be. In fact, state after state, city after city, I can only recall one time when someone moved into the house next to us, and that was back in California. I don't think I was at all concerned about who might move in, maybe because I figured they were bound to be better than the folks who had moved out. I'm sure many of you have had the same kind of experiences Cynthia and I did, both in moving into a neighborhood, and in getting new neighbors. So how would you feel if it were Jesus himself who was going to move in next door? Would Jesus be well received if he were moving into Cook, or maybe along Lake Vermilion?

I started thinking about this after reading the 11th verse of our gospel this morning: "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him." But before we go on, let's back up to verse 10. In that one sentence, the word "world" is mentioned three times, the first time we read "He was in the world," there's continuity there, Jesus has been, is and always will be in the world. The second time we read "the world came into being through him," the very existence of the world is in and through Jesus. The third time we read "yet the world did not know him." Here we have rejection. We read the word "know," which means more than mere intellectual knowledge. The context here includes that but it is also the failure to intimately experience and love as a friend, to be in a right relationship with God. Now this failure to recognize Jesus, to be indifferent to him, is the characteristic reaction of the world. So what do I mean by "world"? it comes from the Greek word *cosmos*, here it means the created order, people, humanity, their affairs and their rebellion against God.

Now we can move on. "He came to what was his own," in other words, Jesus came home, he moved in next door, and the people, his own people, God's chosen people, did not accept him, they did not receive him. Now we live in a very different time from that of Jesus' earthly existence two thousand years ago, but I wonder if his reception would be any different today? Would his own people, "Christians" accept him? His parents' friends and neighbors in Nazareth didn't receive him, they rejected him, so what would we do? Do you want him next door?

You know, I've done premarital counseling with more than one couple where the groom-to-be, (always seems to be the guy) isn't comfortable with meeting with the pastor. It usually comes out pretty quick because I have a tendency to be direct and to the point and I ask a variation of "are you a believer?" Usually there is a little squirming, a pointed stare from his intended, and direct eye contact from me, and the answers come, variations of "I'm just not religious," or "I can't really believe in all this stuff." So, I ask, why are you here? Why not just go to a justice of the peace or get married by the clerk of court? Well, then I hear something like "she wants to get married here," or "she wants you to do the wedding," or occasionally something

like “well, I believe in God and all that but I’m just not religious” or “I don’t want to have to give up all the things I enjoy.”

So do you think if Jesus were to move in to the place next door he would be a killjoy, heavy handed, severe, condemning any attempt to enjoy life? Would he have a chilling effect on your lifestyle? That’s some of what the world believes about Christianity, aided and abetted in part by the message of some of the so-called preachers out there today.

But then in the very next verse, verse 12, we read “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood, or of the will of the flesh, or the will of man, but of God.” What this means is that the “Word became flesh and lived among us,” died on a cross, and rose again., ascending into heaven. And to “all who receive him, who believed in his name...” To receive him is to accept the gift of grace through faith, to believe in his name. To believe in his name, his name, name, not just a convenient handle or label, in Jesus’ time a person’s name stood for the whole personality, the very person him or herself. “In his name” is to believe in the Son and what his name proclaims him to be. When we believe in the Son we yield ourselves up to be possessed by him in whom we believe. And we become family, family because he gives us the power, the right, to become children of God. There is only one Son of God, but we, you and I, become God’s children, we are given that right by believing in his name, by believing in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son.

We become family in the truest sense of family and we discover that in Christ, in his presence, in his presence in us, there is joy, great joy, not just momentary happiness, not gloom and severity, not condemnation, but joy, sheer unadulterated joy in his presence. We become God’s children not by our doing, not by the flesh, not by our own will or that of another, but of God. A sheer miracle, God’s miracle! AMEN