

Sermon 3-5-23
Natalia Del Pino preaching

In the wise words of Hannah Montana, “You can always find your way back home.”

Belmont has been my home for the past 18 years. You have known me completely and taught me my worth through experiences more valuable than thousands of sparrows.

I have met my best friends in this church. I have found home with them no matter where we are. My Belmont home for a week was in the middle of nowhere Arkansas for my first youth trip. I still came back home to Belmont after the hot mess that included a stomach bug, a lack of socks, a refugee experience, and more mosquito bites than I can count. My home has been Toronto, Canada; Charleston, South Carolina; and San Francisco, California, on choir tours. My home has been a Waffle House with my senior class and Cracker Barrel at 6:00 in the morning after No Doze, now reframed as Doze to Value Our Mental and Physical Health... thanks. Emma. Recently the senior girls have adopted a brunch tradition; I'm not exactly sure if that counts as turning into the millennial our youth director is, but I do know that I am truly loved and known by all of them.

This church has known me through everything, just as God has. Belmont has known me through all my life stages. When I was younger, I wanted to be a pastor, lining up my stuffed animals on the pew we had at home to give sermons. I famously said, “Jesus is a protein.” I'm not exactly sure whether I was imitating what I had heard from the pulpit or sharing my own profundity, but hopefully, something in this sermon holds the same weight for you as ‘Jesus is a protein’ did for me when I was 4. Belmont has known me through kindergarten prayer friends, like Anna Cramer who is also one of my childhood best friend's mom. Belmont has known me through my decision to be confirmed. I wasn't struck on the way to Damascus when I decided to officially become a member of the United Methodist Church. Instead, I determined that I valued the intellectual process of learning that is foundational to this church. You have nurtured my curiosity and ideas in a way that has taught me my value and the value of my opinions. Mollie Henry was my Faith Friend; and with her, I had my first cappuccino, and now I'm very loyal to church coffee and the youth room Keurig on Sunday mornings now that I'm not at Fido with Emma Anne.

I know I can never escape the love of Belmont or its people. This church has shown me God every day. I usually like to have a uniqueness complex and be a li'l different during the passing the Christ candle on Sunday nights where we go around the circle and share where we saw God that week. I don't always say church, but I see God in every member of Belmont. I can trust my

relationship with this church will not waver, no matter where or who I am. Mary Jane Duke dropped off supplies every week when we did virtual Sunday school refusing to let a pandemic get in the way of showing each other that we are loved. I have a note from her glued on my Bible because by knowing me, she has shown me God. Now I get to babysit Mary Jane's grandchildren and know that they will have the same privilege I have of growing up in a place that will value them regardless of their identity or interests. Belmont has also given me my emergency contact; thank you, Rachel Parker. Rachel, you're on my list of favorites to call because you have been so much more than my best friend's mom; you have been where I saw God when I needed God the most.

Belmont has taught me how to be at home with all the complex parts of myself. I have complex emotions, a lot of them especially a li'l bit of hanger on Sunday nights at 5:30pm, and Eric Patton is always in the narthex for a hug and a conversation. I ask a lot of questions; my auntie even told me that I would probably get kicked out of a cult because I have too many. I guess that's good news for all of us since now we know Belmont isn't a cult because Pastor Paul will always encourage my questions and take them farther. Amy Cooper and Pastor Kate have taught me to be at home with the childish parts of myself and remind me I can always come back to children's ministry. Gayle Sullivan has taught me to be at home with the decisions I make and to trust myself.

I'm at home, I'm known, and I'm loved here. Thank you, Belmont, and thank you, senior class. We've been through it together since the very beginning. I'm proud to know we can come back home to each other here because Belmont will continue to do what it has done for us.