

The Feast of St. James the Fisherman 2021

Today we celebrate the feast of St. James the Apostle, or as we know him, St. James the Fisherman.

This is our patronal feast or day of title.

Simply put, St. James is our patron saint.

The feast actually falls on today, July 25th, but because the resurrection takes precedence, churches not named St. James transfer the feast day one day forward to Monday.

We at St. James, on the other hand, are allowed to celebrate it today, or in years when it falls on a weekday, on the Sunday after.

(We always transpose forward.)

St. James is often referred to as James the Greater, the name you will see on the icon in our chapel.

He may have been called “the Greater” simply because he was taller than his uncle, James the Less, who was Jesus’ cousin and the presumed author of the Epistle of James.

This makes “our” James Christ’s first cousin once removed.

Matthew tells us that Christ chose James and his brother John to be apostles when he came upon them mending their nets in their boat on the Sea of Galilee.

Their decision to follow Christ may seem somewhat sudden, but keep in mind that they were related and most likely already acquainted.

In what scholars of narrative structure call telescoping, the gospel leaves out all the development and only relates the central point in the story when Christ decides to call the brothers and they accept.

Judging from what little we know about James and John from the gospels, it seems that these two sons of Zebedee were of a higher social status than most fishermen.

We see in Mark, for example, that they had servants.

In addition, if James' brother John is the same person known as the beloved disciple, the purported author of The Gospel of John, then John had connections with the high priest.

The gospels describe both James and John as very spirited.

Jesus nicknamed them the sons of thunder, probably because they exhibited headstrong, impulsive behavior.

They were hotheads.

We see their temper, for example, when Jesus and his disciples are refused hospitality by some Samaritans.

James and John want to call down fire from heaven to destroy the inhospitable foreigners' entire village.

Jesus of course rebukes them and says, "How about we just go to another village."

Their exuberance leads James and John to request of Jesus that they might sit at his right and left hand in glory

(though in Matthew, which we read today, it is their mother who does the asking.)

In Matthew, Christ responds with "whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave.

Mark is more pithy in his gospel.

Christ responds with one of the most quoted passages from the Bible, "the first shall be last."

Whether they leave it to their mother or do it themselves, the two brothers want to be elevated in the hierarchy, to be somehow assured of God's favor.

Their desire for some sort of concrete proof means that they are fearful, that they still do not entirely trust God.

This is a common problem with all the disciples, though each one lives it out differently.

They are all human and not fully able to trust God.

It is, in fact, a work in progress for all of us.

As we grow, so does our trust, and the more we are able to trust God, the less fear we have.

It is a process, and a challenging one, at that.

Christ chose James and John not because they were perfect, but because he knew that their energy, their bombast, though sometimes misdirected, would serve the gospel well.

He saw something in them.

He recognized that being strong-minded was one of their gifts, which, like any and all of our gifts, can be used to serve God.

In addition, under all their bluster, he must have sensed a willingness to follow the way of love.

I can only imagine that Christ was right, and it was James' passionate spreading of the gospel that attracted Herod Agrippa's murderous attention.

As we read in Acts today, Agrippa had James killed with a sword in 44 AD, 11 or 14 years after the crucifixion.

When this pleased the crowd, Agrippa had Peter arrested as an encore.

You may think that James is a bit of a flawed saint, but I challenge you to find a saint who is not.

We are all flawed, all less than God.

It is not perfection, but our willingness to serve God that matters, our willingness to learn to use our gifts to spread healing rather than division.

Our society nevertheless emphasizes perfection, the pursuit of which keeps us enthralled to various influencers who promise to show us the way.

From genetically gifted body builders whose YouTube videos purport to demonstrate how we can achieve the same results with sufficient effort to spiritual gurus who, rather than telling us that God loves us as we are, keep us struggling after some unobtainable goal so that we buy more books, we must be cautious of those who want power over us, want to feel superior to us.

Christianity emphasizes not perfection and superiority, but vulnerability, compassion, identification with the struggles of others.

We know what it is like to struggle, to be challenged, to experience loss.

We therefore can identify with the different struggles, challenges, and losses of others.

It is certainly a lot more fun when we can be together without superiority and domination, simply enjoying one another's gifts.

James is thus a wonderful model for the rest of us, a model of how our humanity, our imperfection is not something to be rooted out, but redirected, turned towards God.

There are steps in applying our gifts to God's service.

It helps to be able to name our gifts, to claim them.

I fear that we tend to emphasize what we cannot do rather than what we can do.

Christ was helping James and John name their gifts when he called them "sons of thunder."

We also must begin to embrace God's love of us.

Our bold claim is that God is not distant, uncaring, unforgiving, manipulative, power hungry, but that God is gracious, loving, forgiving, unlike how many other cultures prior to Christianity saw God or the gods.

The more we allow ourselves to believe that God loves us, the more confident and comfortable we will be in spreading that love to others.

This is why Christ encourages us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

If we cannot love ourselves, we cannot love others.

It's a process, one evidenced by the disciples themselves.

James and John were at one point jostling for power because they did not realize that God is all the power anyone needs.

I feel certain they learned what they needed to learn over time.

What a wonderful legacy, to start out bullheaded and a bit selfish, and to transform into the determined servants of God.

That is all any of us can ask of ourselves.

I hope that you are proud to attend a church named after St. James, someone who was so beautifully human, a model of how we slowly transform.