

St. James Day, 2022

The sons of Zebedee, James and John, were also known as the sons of thunder, probably because they were hotheads.

It was they who wanted to call down fire on the inhospitable Samaritan village, which lead Jesus to respond, “You know, we can just go on to the next village.”

James and John are often causing a stir.

In today’s gospel, for example, they are trying to promote themselves, or, as Matthew tells the story, their *momma* is trying to promote them beyond the other disciples.

As a result, the other ten become angry and run to teacher.

That’s what we do, isn’t it.

When we feel that something is unfair, we run to God.

“God, why should I have to suffer like this? I’m a good person!”

But everyone suffers.

We are all in this together.

Our suffering is an opportunity for others to help.

Their suffering is an opportunity for us to help.

The world is not set up as a reward system.

It is not the kind of training where those who do what the creator wants get a favor.

That would not be learning how to love, but how to please and manipulate.

Look at Jesus' response to the disciples.

He does not say to them, "Yes, James' and John's request is unfair! You are all equal.

They should be rebuked!" which is what the ten disciples want to hear.

Jesus also does not say to them, "Don't be jealous of James' and John's initiative. They

love me and want to be at my right and left hand."

Instead, he reminds all twelve that, if anyone wants to be great in the kingdom of

heaven, then he or she will have to be more humble than others.

You see, all twelve were becoming competitive.

They were thinking like the kingdom of the world rather than the kingdom of heaven.

They wanted to demonstrate their superior worthiness because they have forgotten that

we are all loved equally by God and have nothing to prove.

Only when we stop trying to prove ourselves can we absorb Jesus' message.

Jesus almost never approaches problems or questions directly.

A colleague of mine noted that, in the gospels, Jesus was asked 187 questions, but

answered only 8.

The other 179, he either ignored, returned a question with a question, changed the

subject entirely, or explained that it was the wrong question, and often revealed

their hypocrisy along the way.

By contrast, my colleague noted, Jesus *asked* 307 questions.¹

Is Jesus merely being difficult? Evasive? Non-committal?

No.

This is the approach of someone who wants to help us to change how we see the world,
to change how we tell the story.

The disciples were still telling a story about getting rewards by pleasing God.

This story leads to competition, division, and lack of joy.

The more we compare ourselves with others, the less joyful we become.

We are not in competition.

We each have our own gifts, our own way of serving.

It is joyful to share those gifts.

I will never be a great rugby player, a talented musician, a brilliant engineer, a great
novelist.

If all I attend to is how I fall short of those who are good at those things, I will be
miserable.

We need to tell a story about what we do possess, not what we do not possess.

Jesus knows that our stories organize events into a meaningful narrative.

They are thus deeply woven into our perception of reality and are difficult to change.

¹ Jeff Stevenson, Parish Email Thursday, June 30, 2022.

Everything fits together and dislodging a piece of the story threatens to collapse the
Jenga tower of our world.

Our stories are our reality.

They are all we know and we have trouble imagining anything different.

They are like wet to a fish.

The questions people asked Jesus derived from the stories they told.

They were looking for answers, in other words, that fit into the world as they already
understood it.

Jesus wanted to change their stories fundamentally, but growth is difficult.

Anything truly meaningful, anything that helps us to see the world more from God's
perspective than from that of our ego, is going to be hard for all of us to integrate
into our beings.

We move forward little by little, step by step.

(To do otherwise requires a breakdown, which can be helpful, but messy.)

When we encounter a truly different way of looking at something, when we encounter
“dry,” in other words, it simply makes no sense to us at first.

I was watching “Little Women” while I was sick.

I had forgotten how Mrs. March, the mother, delivered diatribes against corsets.

She understood that corsets were one piece of the narrative that kept women from fully
expressing themselves, and she was not having that for her daughters.

At the time, however, she just sounded crazy to those around her.

Change may come slowly, but if we reflect back on how we thought when we were much younger, we will realize how much we have changed over time.

I bet there was a time for most of us, for example, when female clergy seemed like a strange concept.

Even for those who supported the ordination of women, finally seeing a female in a collar probably felt a little odd.

Today, however, I doubt any of you think it the least bit strange that one of our three clergy at St. James is female.

If you need more convincing that you have changed, you might try looking on YouTube at a sitcom from the 70s.

I bet you will be surprised at how different it feels today to hear, for example, some of the things the Bunkers discuss on *All in the Family*.

What once shocked or provoked now has little effect.

Our stories have changed.

Christ is not being evasive.

He is trying to speed up this process of changing our stories by giving people a jolt.

It is the same approach used in many other religions that seek to free us from ourselves.

For example, it is the purpose of *Zen koans*.

James and his brother, John, and their mother were very much stuck in a way of telling the story that emphasized ingratiating themselves with God, though they may not have realized it.

It was their “wet.”

The other ten disciples’ response suggests that they, too, were caught up in the same narrative.

Jesus does not address this head on because that would mean accepting the overall story as they tell it.

He wants deeper change.

He tells them all that those who wish “to be great among [them] must be [their] servant, and whoever wishes to be first among [them] must be [their] slave.”

He then reminds them that he believes this to be the only meaningful way to be and explains that he is willing even to die for it.

Eventually, James got the message and was also willing to die for it.

We learn in Acts that James persisted in his ministry until Herod Agrippa, grandson of Herod the Great, had him put to death with a sword.

That is, James was beheaded, the first martyr.

When it pleased people to see Herod's display of power, Herod realized that he had a winning approach and followed up by arresting Peter.

He intended to execute him after the Passover, but it was not yet Peter's time, and an angel released him from prison.

There is only one story that Jesus' accepts, and that is that God is in control and loves us all equally.

This is not easy for us to accept.

We start out as babies with nothing but ego.

It is challenging to move from wet to dry, but this seems to be the purpose of our time here on Earth.

Initially, we feel like we need to prove ourselves, to earn God's love, but it is in attempting to earn it that we go awry.

It is a long journey and, for most of us, just like for James, it is a slow process, but well worth the journey as we learn to embrace God with the same loving fervor with which God embraces us.