

## St. James Day 2025

Happy St. James Day!

There's a lot going on here at St. James, inside and out.

You might have noticed we are making the place look and function better with new siding.

In addition, we have secured a permit to do work on the Main side so that it will be more suited to our ministry purposes and will make it apparent to the town that we are connected to our community.

Well, really, just making it apparent that we exist will be a giant leap forward.

Since my arrival six years ago, I have met three people in the area who knew we were here.

That is also the reason for the new exterior lighting that will be turned on fully once the siding is finished.

Of course, the most important thing is how we live out the gospel, but we want the outside to reflect the vibrancy of the inside.

A restaurant that looks unappetizing on the outside is unlikely to reach many people no matter what food they serve.

To this end, the vestry have been working hard to move us forward so that everything functions well for our ministry within the church and for our reach into Brunswick

County to all those who need a place of community and love, grace and forgiveness, but might have given up believing that such a place exists.

I am biased, of course, but I would say that we are the premier church in the area for truly welcoming absolutely everyone who wants to walk the way of love with others.

The only question we have for people is, “Do you want to walk and pray with us?”

I have told you before that it is very important to me personally that everyone know that he or she is welcome here, without any hint of reservation, and we hope that everyone feels at home.

If people visit and do not feel like this *is* their home, then we wish them well on their journeys and pray that they find where God is leading them.

It is not always easy for visitors who have been told that God is a demanding disciplinarian to accept that God is actually love and grace, as Jesus taught

How can that be?

How can all that theology and all those churches have got this wrong?

To which we respond, “Go read the gospels yourself and see what you find there.”

It also can be difficult for people who have been told that being a Christian means subscribing to the right doctrine.

“How can all that theology and all those churches have got this wrong, too?”

To which we respond, “Jesus did not teach a dogma. Go and read. He taught us how to treat one another and ourselves, how to dwell in community as one body.”

Jesus strenuously resisted Pharisaic religion, and people have just as strenuously reintroduced it into Christianity because it requires so much less of us, less love, less responsibility, less honest self-reflection.

Richard Rohr explains it well: “laws and prohibitions usually win our attention because they are more clearheaded and quantifiable than anything to do with love, intimacy, and surrender. Forgiveness and mercy are just too fluid and messy—unearnable!”<sup>1</sup>

It is not easy to admit that the things God desires for us may be very different from the things that we think are righteous.

In reality, we are fed these categories by our societies, not by God.

We baptize social customs, pretend they are Christian, and read them back into the Bible.

Hollywood worked hard to establish a certain culture that was all image and no substance.

I was watching a 1938 film, “Merrily We Live,” in which a somewhat interesting narrative was pegged to the categories, the social grid of the day.

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1 Richard Rohr, *The Tears of Things* (New York: Convergent, 2025), 41.

The head of the house was a man, governed by logic, who had made a whole lot of money.

He had a wife who had no logic whatsoever, but was dominated by emotions, who wanted to rehabilitate “tramps.”

She kept losing money when the “tramps” ran off with the silverware.

She stubbornly takes in a new “tramp” with an accent even more posh than their own.

One by one, they all learn to like him.

The daughter, a woman also governed by emotion, falls in love with him.

When he turns out to be a successful novelist, the father gives his daughter permission to date him.

The only black character was governed not by logic or emotion, but purely by instinct.

Imagine seeing movie after movie that reinforces this ideological grid—men are logical, women are emotional, African-Americans are driven by instinct.

To maintain this ideology, Hollywood hid behind the scenes the reality of the stars and the misery that maintaining the image caused them.

For any actors who did not fit the model of logical men with no feelings (other than anger) and emotional women serving in the kitchen, they arranged “purple marriages” to conceal the truth.

Generations of Americans assumed that the roles they saw on the silver screen were laid down by Christ himself, though *he* never spoke about any of this.

In reality, God usually surprises us, usually breaks through any cultural categories and stuffy scruples to create experiences for us that encourage us to grow, to learn, to deepen our relationship with what is truly important.

God understands us through and through, and knows just what kind of experiences we need in order to grow, and those experiences often do not fit within cultural expectations of right and wrong.

The prodigal son had to waste his fortune to mature spiritually.

The Episcopal Church's commitment to depth means that we will never be a megachurch.

We serve those people who feel the need for personal honesty and self-awareness, who are ready to surrender to God, to be surprised by God, who long for a clear-eyed relationship with one another and with God, one that exceeds cultural limitations.

We offer not a distracting worship experience that mirrors the approach of consumer capitalism, a church that seems like a well-crafted commercial or a concert, but a quiet, reflective space that brings us into confrontation with ourselves, with God, with truth.

It is intentional; it is beautiful, and there are people out there who need us.

I love to see people come here and realize that they can be themselves and be appreciated for who they are.

The one thing God *never* called a person to do in the Bible was to conform to any given society.

Followers of God were always out of step with their surroundings, but often at peace in their hearts.

Jesus and the prophets were frequently the objects of social disapproval.

As Rohr writes, “God’s message and messengers—and often the hearers—all tend to be outliers to ‘the way everybody thinks.’ . . . The prophets . . . consistently laugh at the supposedly normal and parody the so-called successful.”<sup>2</sup>

Moses was adopted; David was the neglected, smallest of his brothers; Jesus was the poor child of an unwed mother.

The journey is usually messy, and God is in there somewhere.

When people realize that St. James is a safe place to be who God created us to be, when they can sense people are genuinely joyful that they are here, fear and anger and shame start to melt away.

If you think you are weird, you are right.

If you think you are imperfect, you are right.

If you think you are not weird or imperfect, keep thinking.

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<sup>2</sup> Rohr, 30, 33.

The next step after embracing who God created us to be is realizing that we are part of a whole and that what we do affects the whole.

While being ourselves, we think not only of ourselves, but also about the entire community, the body to which we belong, in which we have a place.

Our well being and the well being of the community are mutually dependent.

One might think everyone would want this, but many people are so dazzled by the prospect of standing out rather than standing with, of being greater rather than helping the community to be great, of escape rather than facing truth, of fitting in as a way to be loved (which never works) rather than being themselves so that others can know and love them.

They are, in other words, so enamored of the world that they are bitterly opposed to the message of unity and love.

They twist it and make Jesus' clear message into something that serves their own purposes.

Others simply resist the message wholesale, which is why Herod gained a lot of approval when he arrested James and killed him by the sword.

This is because deep within, we can sense that being selfish is wrong, that it separates us from the body, and to avoid that uncomfortable feeling, we just project it onto others.

“Kill James.”

“That will silence that voice in our heads.”

Except it does not.

One who chooses the scapegoating path must continually run from shame and fear.

One becomes a slave to insecurity.

In Christ, we find freedom.

When I was a grad student, there was an academic discussion about whether one could be a Nazi and a good father.

Academics seemed unable to unravel this question that is so easy for Christianity.

One could surely give one’s children all the things of this world—position, wealth, education—and not physically torture them, but one would also be teaching them to run from their truths, to hide in scapegoating, to avoid their shadows, to be slaves to culture.

We have some newish people among us.

We want you to know that you are welcome to take on various roles in the church.

We do not want to make you feel rushed as you figure out exactly where you fit in, but we are happy to invite you to become lectors, to run for vestry, to join the prayer group, to join us for spiritual formation or morning prayer, altar guild, ushers, etc.

We have a writers' group that is forming in the fall, as well as a book group.

Wherever you feel like you would like to serve and be active, when you are ready, let us know.

We Episcopalians do not require many specific beliefs.

God always exceeds them, anyway.

We try to develop the kind of behavior that leads to a loving, respectful, compassionate sacred community.

Jesus said clearly, they will know my disciples not by what they think, not by their perfection, not by their success, but by how they love one another.

We think he meant it.

Whoever is great among us is a servant and those who wish to be greater than others cause division.

We work humbly and joyfully together.

We thank St. James for his bold witness.