

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost; Festival of St. James of Jerusalem; October 23, 2022

+ Matthew 13:54-58 +

“Jesus, Give Us James’ Fervent Faith”

Jesus entered his hometown and taught in their synagogue. As a result, the people were amazed and said, “Where did this fellow get this wisdom and these miracles? Isn’t this the carpenter’s son? Isn’t his mother named Mary? And aren’t James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas his brothers? And aren’t all of his sisters here with us? Where then did this fellow get all of these things?” And they took offense at him.

But Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor, except in his own hometown and in his own house.” He did not do many miracles there because of their unbelief.

So that we don’t start off too negatively, let’s start at the end and work our way backward.

Would you agree that this man St. James has a strong, fiery, fervent faith? St. James was living in Jerusalem. According to a reliable historian, he was protected for a long time by a certain governor. But then that governor was replaced by someone who hated St. James and the rest of the Christians, and ordered St. James stoned to death. And James died for his Savior, without flinching.

Now let’s go back a little more. Years earlier, there was a massive famine in and around Israel. St. James’ faith was so strong that he organized a Mediterranean-worldwide offering to feed widows and orphans suffering from the famine. Would you agree this man’s faith is vibrant?

Let’s go back a little more. There were controversies. Divisions among Christians. As the gospel of Christ spread around the world, there was a question about whether Gentile converts should be expected to keep the Old Testament Laws that God gave to the Israelites. Some said, “Yes, they must keep them all.” Others said, “No, Gentile don’t have to keep any of the Old Testament laws.” (And that was the right answer.) But St. James also understood that there were certain laws from the Old Testament that Jewish Christians would be deeply offended to see broken. And so James moved to heal the division and prevent pain. He said, correctly, that Gentile Christians don’t have to keep any Old Testament laws. But, out of sensitivity and compassion for the Jewish Christians, they should voluntarily keep some of them. And there was agreement on that, and it became the practice of the early Christian Church. It happened at the Jerusalem Council, with St. James in the lead. You heard the story earlier from Acts 15.

Or how about this? Would you call this a strong faith in Jesus? There was a new apostle and missionary, named Paul. He used to go by Saul, back when he persecuted Christians. Because Paul was new to the faith, and because he’d worked in the past to hurt Christians, some doubted that he really was an apostle and thought Paul’s authority should be rejected. James had a choice. He could promote his own standing and authority by demeaning Paul’s. Or he could lift up Paul and, more importantly, the message of Christ he proclaimed. He chose to hold Paul’s hand in fellowship.

Let’s go back a little more. How’s this for a fervent faith? Under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, St. James wrote a letter to his fellow Jewish Christians. They were suffering from famine. They were also suffering from persecution and temptation. Not only that, some of them were suffering from an apathetic faith that treated good works as unimportant. James told them to be patient in their faith, and even to cherish temptations and trials because God uses them to build perseverance. He told them to pray with complete faith that their loving Lord would hear and answer. He told them to be humble in all things. And he commanded them to prove their faith to the world with good works. St. James’ faith was on fire.

Or, finally, how about this? The strength of St. James' faith was so clear for the Christians in Jerusalem to see, that they made him the head elder, or bishop, of their church. And at that time the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem made up the strongest center of Christianity in the world.

St. James of Jerusalem had a strong faith indeed. A faith to lead in Christ, to instruct in the Spirit's words, to feed those in need, to heal divisions and move Christians forward in harmony. What a faith!

Alright, that's enough of that. Now we should go back even farther. Because St. James didn't always have such a fiery faith in Jesus. In fact, he didn't have any faith at all. And it's not hard to see.

This St. James is almost certainly the half brother of Jesus Christ. They were half brothers because they had the same mother, Mary, but they were conceived very differently. Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born without sin. James was conceived by Joseph and Mary, and he inherited their sin. So he was born without faith. And he stayed that way for quite some time.

In the Gospels, we find James and his brothers accusing Jesus of being out of his mind. We find them trying to block Jesus from carrying out his ministry. And sadly, in the Gospel we hear Jesus say this, **"A prophet is not without honor, except in his own hometown and in his own home."** St. James, Jesus' own brother, did not honor him. He did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God.

Why not? Well, as we already heard, James was human just like us. He was born in sin and without faith, like everyone else. But there is another way to look at it, too. James was just too familiar with Jesus. When he looked at Jesus his eyes and brain perceived just another guy. Just another one of his brothers. Maybe James thought of Jesus as the kid that he watched their dad teach how to use a saw and hammer. The kid who sat with him at the supper table and ate like everyone else, who slept and walked and talked just like everyone else. And now Jesus calls himself the Son of God? Come on. He sure doesn't look anything like the Son of God.

Why is this a likely reason for James not to believe? Well, listen to what the people in Jesus' hometown say about Jesus. They were familiar with Jesus, too. They saw him grow up; just another kid, like the rest. No way he could be the Son of God! **Jesus entered his hometown and taught in their synagogue. As a result, the people were amazed and said, "Where did this fellow get this wisdom and these miracles? Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother named Mary? And aren't James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas his brothers? And aren't all of his sisters here with us? Where then did this fellow get all of these things?" And they took offense at him.** "Taking offense" in this context means rejecting, disbelieving Jesus' claim to be the Son of God. And why? Jesus was familiar to them. Can you hear the derision when they call him, **"this fellow"**? Carpenter's son! Regular, normal family! And now he wants us to believe he's God's Son?! Sure, he can do miracle. But there must be some other explanation for that. Because he's just Jesus, a fellow who grew up like all the rest, from right here in little Nazareth.

It wasn't just Jesus' hometown that saw him as nothing and refused to honor him with faith. Jesus said it was his hometown and his own house. So, James' faith wasn't always so fervent. In fact, for a long time, his faith in Jesus didn't even exist at all.

So, what happened? Well, the short answer is: God changed St. James' mind. The Spirit convinced him to look at his brother Jesus and see more than a human brother, or "a fellow" who grew up in the same house. The Spirit changed James' heart by giving him faith and then growing it to put Jesus ahead of all.

The Spirit sent him up the road to a faith in Jesus so fiery that it led, taught, fed, built up, brought together, and met death fearlessly.

When that faith started, we don't know. But we do know at least one important thing that happened. St. Paul, whose apostolic authority James confirmed, wrote this: **Brothers, I am going to call your attention to the gospel that I preached to you. You received it, and you took your stand on it. You are also being saved by that gospel that was expressed in the words I preached to you, if you keep your hold on it – unless you have believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received:**

**that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures,
that he was buried,
that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,
and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve.**

After that he appeared to over five hundred brothers at the same time, most of whom are still alive, but some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, and then to all the apostles.

There were lots of guys in Israel named James. But the fact that Paul doesn't specify which James this is makes it very likely that it was the best-known James, Jesus' brother. The one who had not honored his brother as the Son of God.

And then Jesus appeared to him, risen from the dead. Why would that propel a person to the pinnacle of faith? As Paul explains in this very chapter: **But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came by a man, the resurrection of the dead also is going to come by a man. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ they all will be made alive.**

Jesus' resurrection means that all who trust in him will rise in glory. We will be made alive and enter the kingdom of heaven, body and soul. And we know this, because Jesus' resurrection also means he can't be just some fellow who grew up in Nazareth, or just a human brother. He is who claims to be. He is a man; he is also God, with power over death. He is also God, who was born under the law to keep it perfectly for us and redeem us from our sins. He is also God, who died to bring us who were separated from God and hostile to him back to him in peace, children to their dear Father.

See Jesus alive, and you see him for who he really is. Someone deserving of full honor, full, fiery, fervent faith because he is true God who saves us and guarantees our own resurrection.

Today we ask Jesus to give us the fervent faith of St. James. James started with no faith in Jesus, but God gave him faith and set it ablaze with the risen Jesus. We started with no faith. God changed our minds to see Jesus for who he is. But sometimes we still treat him very small, as just some fellow. Sometimes our worship of Jesus is sporadic; our offerings to him can be weak; our effort to live our Christian faith for the world to see flickers; our prayers fall silent; our generosity tightens. What is this but treating Jesus small, as some fellow? Even those who believe fall into that sin from time to time.

Jesus, give us faith like St. James by feeding our faith as you fed his. Show us your risen self. We do not challenge you to give us the privilege of James, or Peter, or the Twelve, or the five hundred who saw you with their own two eyes. But you show us yourself in even more certain ways. Our eyes can deceive us. But God's Word never does. When you show yourself to us there, we are certain you live. When you come to us in your Supper, we are certain you live. Knowing you live, we also know that you are God's Son who

lived, died, and rose for us so that we will live forever. Risen Jesus, turn our eyes to you, the risen Son of God.

Then our faith will grow. And we will no longer treat you as just some fellow, something small. We'll follow you with the fervent faith of St. James.

Like St. James, we will look for those who hunger and feed them. Like him, we will seek to heal and unite Jesus' followers in the truth of your Word. Like him, we will elevate Jesus above our own status and importance. Like him, we will pray boldly, live humbly, rejoice even in sufferings, and prove our faith with our works. Like St. James, we will serve faithfully in all the roles God gives us. And like him, we will die unafraid, knowing that in Christ's resurrection our own is coming.

Dear Jesus, show us who you are and what you have done for us by showing us your risen self in Word and sacrament. As you do, build our faith in you. Amen.