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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, September 26, 2021
18th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 26/Proper 21/Year B

First Reading: Numbers 11:4-6,10-16,24-29

Second Reading: James 5:13-20

Gospel Reading: Mark 9:38-50

Sermon Title: “James – Brother of Jesus, Apostle of Christ – Part 5”

Theme

Marks of the Christian community include praying for those who are sick and in need, celebrating with those in good health, restoring those who have strayed, confessing sins to one another, and offering forgiveness to each other.

Text – James 5:13-20

¹³Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. ¹⁴Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. ¹⁶Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. ¹⁷Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. ¹⁸Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

¹⁹My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, ²⁰you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner’s soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Theme

On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus teaches his disciples about ministry that involves service and sacrifice. His disciples are slow to realize that these words apply to them as well as to others.

Gospel: Mark 9:38-50

³⁸John said to [Jesus,] “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” ³⁹But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰Whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

⁴²“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. ⁴³If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. ⁴⁵And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. ⁴⁷And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

⁴⁹“For everyone will be salted with fire. ⁵⁰Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

Introduction

I hope you have been enjoying this look into the story of James, the author of the Letter of James, as much as I am. But alas, today this series concludes. If you haven't done it already, I would encourage you to carve out an hour of quiet time and read the letter from start to finish, it's only five chapters long.

As has been my pattern with sermon series, I will begin with some discovery into some issues about James, but then get into the actual passage from the Letter of James prescribed for the week.

Issue Five: The Martyrdom of James.

The fifth and final issue we have to contend with is: The Martyrdom of James.

To be very clear, scripture doesn't record the death of James. The Book of Acts, a chronological accounting of the history of the early Church, ends with Paul in house arrest in Rome, and James was likely still alive and leading the church at Jerusalem. The historian Josephus, whom I've mentioned a time or two, placed James' death during a time of transition between two Roman governors, the probable date of 62 AD.

By that time, James had earned himself some nicknames that I first mentioned in week one: James the Just, James of Jerusalem and add to that, one I just discovered, Old Camel Knees. Why Old Camel Knees? Hegessipus, a 2nd century Christian, wrote that James was often found alone in the Temple on his knees begging for God to forgive the Jews and that he spent so much time on his knees in prayer that they "became hard like those of a camel

¹⁶Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

His life bore evidence that he believed what he wrote about prayer in James 5:16:
¹⁶Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

His faith was soon put to the test. Hegessipus recorded the following about James' death, as quoted by Eusebius, a 4th century Church historian:

James the Just is so well respected by even the non-Christian Jews, that when James tells them Jesus is the Savior, some of the ruling class become believers. This worries the Jewish leaders, who beg James to speak to the crowds...

The Jewish leaders take James to the summit of the temple, where the crowd can see and hear him, and cry out in a loud voice, "We are all bound to obey you, as you are just. The people are confused and following the dead man named Jesus. Tell us about this crucified Jesus."

James calls out just as loudly, "Why do you ask me about Jesus? He sits in heaven, at the right hand of God, and will return on the clouds of heaven." Many of the people are convinced then and there that Jesus is the Resurrected Lord and start praising Him on the spot.

The leaders are beside themselves. They shout to the people, "Oh dear! The just man is confused himself!" and throw James down from that height. But he is not killed, so the leaders start stoning him.

James does what he has always done. He kneels down and asks God to forgive the Jews. The stones continue to batter his body as a priest yells, "Stop! What are doing? The just one is praying for us!"

A launderer takes the club used to beat clothes and hurls it at James' head, and the just one finally dies.

Sermon

Before we turn our attention to the passage for today, I want you to be aware that:

Last week's sermon text was James 3:13 – 4:3, 7-8a

This week's sermon text is James 5:13-20

What is left out?

Admonitions and exhortations pointing out the contrast between godliness and worldliness:

- 4:4-5 ~ Warnings against choosing friendship with the world over God
- 4:6-10 ~ Warnings against pride versus humility
- 4:11-12 ~ Warnings against speaking evil against another
- 4:13-17 ~ Warnings against the arrogance of planning without regard for the Lord's will
- 5:1-6 ~ Warnings against the folly of accumulating riches
- 5:7-12 ~ Exhortations to exercise patience

Having warned his readers about many negative characteristics of poor discipleship, James turned his attention to positive actions and characteristics that will improve the lives of his readers both now and into eternity. Much of this will seem obvious to us but remember we are reading instructions to converts to Christianity in the 1st century. Churches were not on every corner. There were no established seminaries to train pastors in scripture and doctrine. There wasn't even scripture and doctrine available in the way we have them. So James wrote:

^{13a}Are any among you suffering? They should pray.

Again, I hope this seems obvious to you, but it would not be to Jewish converts to Christianity. Jesus Christ made prayer to our Heavenly Father a discipline that all of us can do. It was not that way in Judaism. He also encouraged us to take all our concerns, not the least of which might be our suffering, to our Heavenly Father. Jesus said,

^{Matthew 7:11}If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

James also addressed those on the opposite end of the emotional spectrum:

^{13b}Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise.

Honestly, I've never been to a Jewish worship service. I don't know what the attitude of their worship services is like, but I doubt they are "cheerful." However,

post-resurrection James knew that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is all good news! There may be times or periods of upset in our lives but we should never lose sight of the fact that though the battle rages on, the war has already been won by our Lord Jesus! We should offer him our praise as often as we can.

¹⁴Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.

¹⁵The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.

You may not be aware of this but this passage right here is the reason I have an oil stock ring on my lanyard that I wear when I go out visiting. The oil stock ring has a cotton swab inside that is saturated with oil that was blessed by our bishop during Holy Week and then distributed to the pastors of the parishes of the Synod. Whenever the holy oils are used, the ministry of the bishop who blessed and consecrated them is symbolically present.

James continued:

¹⁶Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

¹⁷Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. ¹⁸Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

Confessing your sins before one another? I don't want to sound like I disagree with scripture, but I would advise you to be careful whom you confess to. Provided we haven't hurt someone that we need to apologize to, we only need to confess to God. Having said that, I know myself that hearing the words of assurance of forgiveness is critical, and that is why we do it in church every other week. And sometimes the burden of a particular sin is so heavy that face-to-face confession is beneficial. That is where I come in. You should take advantage of me and allow me to deliver those words of God's grace in a human voice.

James also wrote that we should pray for one another, for healing, for the prayers of the righteous are powerful and effective. We do this during worship too, during the

Prayers of Intercession. And I hope and pray that you do it as often as you do your daily devotions and prayers. God is changed by our prayers, and so are we.

¹⁹My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, ²⁰you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Finally, James invited his readers to tend to one another. This is the most frustrating part of my pastoral ministry – tending the flock. Of course, I am preaching to the choir here, but there are others – people who have worshiped here, took advantage of God's grace here, people who enjoyed our fellowship enough to join our congregation, and yet, have drifted away. I hope to put a team together soon to make contact with those we have not seen in a long time. The pandemic has certainly interrupted worship attendance for many, and if that is a person's reason and they are being fed through our online presence, well and good. It's the best we can do.

But I suspect others who were not very active before, will use the pandemic as their excuse to just not come back. James wrote that they are still our responsibility. James took the position that separation from the Church is separation from the salvation Jesus died for, so we the Church should take this seriously.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

We have spent the last five weeks studying James, the brother of Jesus and Apostle of Christ. But it was no mere history lesson. It might have been fun and interesting learning about a man who, it turned out, was the younger brother of Jesus, but that isn't what I hope you take with you. I hope you took advantage of a unique opportunity to take an intimate look at a reluctant apostle who probably didn't want to admit his brother was the Messiah and Son of God.

Seriously, try to put yourselves in his shoes. I am the fourth of five in my family. The older three were honor students and won scholarships. I had to hear about my older siblings every first day of school every year. Did I live up to the Jesse reputation they had developed? Let's just say I was differently gifted. I had a larger “fun” gene than they did – it's not my fault.

It will come as no surprise that you and I are not the Messiah. We can laugh at such a statement, but if we were honest, truly honest, most of us think a lot of ourselves. We think that we are pretty successful in our chosen fields and we've done alright for ourselves.

James the brother of Jesus, Apostle of Christ, James the Just, James the Leader of the Church at Jerusalem, Old Camel Knees, used none of that to his advantage. On the contrary, all those accolades he received were earned by his life's work. Having witnessed his brother's power over sin and death, he came to grips with the truth that his older brother is the Christ, and he devoted himself to furthering his mission. He, like all the other apostles, had his own spin on the gospel. He leaned more toward a lived-out pedagogy of works, the idea that confronted with the truth that Jesus Christ has something eternal in store for those who call him Lord, he taught that that faith in Jesus Christ should be demonstrated by trying to live up to his example, knowing that that is an impossible task. Nevertheless, one that James thought honored God revealed in Jesus Christ, and I might add, it cost him his life.

As we bring this study to a close, let us all be challenged by the example of Jesus of course, but also the example of his little brother, James who did his level best to live up to the example of his big brother, knowing achievement and success is not the goal, faithfulness is. And faithfulness is best demonstrated with visible works.

Prayer

Merciful Lord, we give you thanks for the ministry of James, brother of Jesus, apostle of Christ. May his care for the church through both exhortation and admonition still be honored by this church and Christian churches everywhere. Help us to recognize we are all equally loved by you and inspire us to care for those your Son died to save. We pray all this in Jesus' name. Amen