

Called by Name: James, Radical Self-Emptying, and the Reign of God

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
On February 25th, 2018

Today our sermon series on the disciple turns to James, the older of the two sons of Zebedee. He and his brother John were called by Jesus as they were mending their nets on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. James and his brother seemed to be in Jesus' inner circle, given that there are a number of stories where they and Peter are alone with Jesus, just the four of them. It is this James we are reflecting on today whose remains are purportedly buried in the Cathedral at Santiago, the end point of the Camino pilgrimage Judith and I and our daughters took nearly three years ago. After walking 500 miles to reach the place where he is interred, I have a special connection with James.

This morning's scripture reading does not cast James and his brother in the most positive of lights. They come across looking oh so human. Pay attention now to what they ask Jesus, and for how he responds, and how the other disciples react and for what sort of lesson we might glean from all of this.

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.' And he said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?' And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.' But Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?' They replied, 'We are able.' Then Jesus said to them, 'The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.' When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

When a person approaches you and the first thing out of his or her mouth is, "I want you to do for me whatever I ask of you," you know that what is coming next is more of a demand than a gentle request. So you watch out for the hook. And you also know, by the way the request is prefaced, and the way the pronouns are ordered in the request, just whose interest the person is more concerned about in this interaction. **I** want you to do **for me** whatever **I** ask of you. We can try to soft-soap it, but requests that are framed like that are based in ego.

Having made—and received—a number of such asks like that over the years—in my marriage, in my family, in school settings, in relationships, in church, in prayer—I am better at recognizing it, especially when *other people* are doing it. It's always a little harder for me to see it when I myself am doing this.

Now to be fair to such requests, this is often the way life together in relationships and families and community and society and the world gets negotiated. We say what we want and need, we speak up for what we believe is right, we get **our** oar in the water. If those who are unjustly treated, if those who are oppressed, if those who are always on the short end of the stick in society, are not given the chance for their voices to be heard, for them to say *this is what I want, this is what I need, this is what we want, this is what we need*, that's a problem. If people in relationships are dominated and become or are forced to become doormats, if they are shushed, if there is not a certain amount of healthy ego

present that allows a person or people the chance to advocate for themselves—families and communities and society as a whole become unbalanced and impoverished. But the trouble in our dog-eat-dog world is that it is often the ones with the biggest egos, the most opportunity, and the least real need who seize the floor. As we live our lives in the world around us, those of us who have more power, bigger egos, greater opportunity and less need should always bear that in mind.

When James and his younger brother approached Jesus with their request, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you. Grant us to sit at your right and your left when you come in your glory,” this provided Jesus with a marvelous teaching opportunity about what it means to be part of the reign of God.

Now, in the Gospel of Matthew’s version of this story, James and John are not the ones who make the ask. Their mother does it for them. “Jesus, let my boys sit on your right and your left when you come in your glory.” Talk about a helicopter parent. That is not just a 21st century invention. What is she doing in the conversation anyway? Had she been following them around from village to village, or did they just happen to be in the neighborhood at that particular time?

But Mark doesn’t give James and John the cover of their mother wanting them to be honored and famous and in power. Mark just lets them do the asking. And even in Matthew, Jesus sees through the mother’s ploy, yeah, yeah, yeah, and turns immediately to look at her sons. They really don’t know what they are asking.

Their question, while very human, seems particularly dimwitted when you look at what has led up to this particular scene in Matthew’s version of Jesus’ story. Beginning two chapters before, Jesus, in response to a question about who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, has taken a child and put that child in the midst of them and said, “Unless you become like children, you’ll never enter God’s kingdom.” He’s told the story about the debtor who has been forgiven much, not caring about what happens to a fellow servant—in fact, not forgiving the fellow servant. He’s rebuked the disciples for trying to prevent children from coming to him. He’s invited the rich young ruler who wants to know how he can inherit—possess the kingdom of heaven that he’s got to sell everything and give the money to the poor and to come and follow him, and the rich young ruler turns away, sorrowful. After that when Peter says, “We’ve left everything to follow you, what do we get?” Jesus has, in response, told the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, the punchline of which (and we hate this punchline) is that everybody who is called and goes to work, regardless of how early or how late in the day, 6 a.m. or 5 p.m., gets the same payment. And Jesus has shared with his disciples—for a third time—that he is going to suffer and die at the hands of the religious and civil authorities—and then he’ll be raised on the third day.

That’s when bright Jimmy and Johnny ask—or have their mother ask on their behalf—“Can we sit on your right and left when you come back in glory?”

I can just see Jesus doing a slow burn over that question. I see a face palm over that. Like, “What part of what I have been telling you guys has been unclear? This is not about status, or power, or position. In fact, it’s about the exact opposite. It’s about radical self-emptying love. The kind that will set aside all power and all privilege to go to the cross, the kind that will put the needs of others above one’s own comfort and convenience. Are you up for that, boys? Can you drink the cup that I’m about to drink? Are you able to give up your own egos for the sake of love and justice and mercy? Well? What about it, James? What about it?”

And James and his brother respond, waaay too quickly it seems to me, “Oh yes! We’re able!” Hint. Anybody who is concerned about getting a special place in the kingdom of God—in heaven or here on earth—has not grasped what the kingdom of God is all about.

When the other ten disciples heard about James and John’s request, they were understandably ticked. Which gave Jesus another chance to talk about what it looks to like to be first in the kingdom, if you really want that. It is to serve, not to be served. It’s about radical self-emptying love that goes all the way to the cross.

Alright, fine. So what do we do with that, a couple of thousand years later? We, who live in and around McLean. We, who live in a larger culture that emphasizes the individual, and thrives on the promulgation of fear, and promotes the pursuit of status and recognition, and putting others first is just not what we learn. What do we do in a culture that is just as resistant, if not more so, to the idea that serving others should be our ultimate aim. We’ve always lived in an ego-driven world. At no point in history, including the first century, has radical self-emptying ever been an easy sell.

One of the most helpful things I’ve ever gleaned from my time in spiritual direction has been the following breath prayer, “It’s not about me. Thanks be to God.” It’s not about me, thanks be to God. It’s not about ME thanks be to God. In and out, in and out, in and out.

I share it with you, not just to give you a glimpse behind the curtain, but because I think it’s a handy prayer to have in anyone’s quiver of spiritual practices. Somebody says to me, “Aaron, you are the best preacher, the best pastor, the best whatever, I’ve ever heard or met.” It’s not about me, thanks be to God. Or, conversely, “Aaron, I didn’t like what you said in that sermon or what the Session decided or the way you cut your hair.” It’s not about ME, thanks be to God.

Of course, you can pray that and not act on it or believe it. Which is what makes that prayer so difficult. To really figure out what it is about, if **it’s not about me**, and to make sure that what **I say** is not about me is **not somehow in my mind** still all about me.

So what is it about, finally? Well, a look at the life of Jesus gives us a clue. A look at what he told James and his brother John gives us a clue. It’s about love, justice, mercy, and the gradual reordering of ego for the good not just of one’s own self but of the entire created order.

A colleague of mine, Jake Owensby, says that our problem is one of orientation. We think that we are center of the universe. I think James and his brother John were struggling with that.

Owensby says, “A world that we seek to control in order to achieve our goals, to secure our status, to protect our privilege, to assert our power, to cling to our stuff, and to consume the objects of our desire is a life hurtling toward destruction. That’s what it means to be the center of the universe.”¹

Maybe part of coming to worship Sunday after Sunday after Sunday or being part of a small group during the week or otherwise participating in a community of faith is to get us knocked off that center and onto a different center.

¹ Jake Owensby, “It’s Time For A Revolution,” *Looking For God In Messy Places* <https://jakeowensby.com/2018/02/23/its-time-for-a-revolution>, 23 Feb 2018 (last accessed 28 Feb 2018)

Father Richard Rohr in his book *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* talks about that reorientation in this way. He writes:

Meaty spirituality must first of all teach us freedom from the self, from my own self as a reference point for everything or anything. This is the necessary Copernican Revolution wherein we change reference points. Copernicus discovered that Earth is not the center of the universe. Now we have to discover that we are not the center of any universe either. We are not finally a meaningful reference point. Although we do have to start with self at the center to build a necessary “ego structure,” we then must move beyond it. The big and full world does not circle around me or you.²

We had an intern chaplain during my sophomore year of college who used to tell me with alarming regularity, “Aaron, the axis of the world does not go through the center of your head.”

So what will it be? The axis of the world going through my head, your head, our heads? Or radical, self-emptying love?

I have a friend who likes to talk about spectrum logic. He says that every characteristic in life exists on a spectrum. There’s a spectrum of patience, for instance. I’m either more or less patient. There’s a spectrum of kindness. I’m either more or less kind. There’s a spectrum that goes from utter selfishness on one end to radical self-emptying on the other. I’m not sure I can get to radical self-emptying all that often, but I can move the needle in that direction. One way I do that is by saying to myself, “It’s not about you, Aaron. It’s not **about me**. Thanks be to God.”

There was another man named James. James Earl Carter—Jimmy for short. In the aftermath of his losing the Presidential election in 1980, Jimmy Carter had to grapple with his wife Roslynn about what would happen next. Regardless of what you think about what sort of President Jimmy Carter was, he’s proven in some ways to be a pretty good ex-President. He and Roslynn grappled with what would happen after he was voted out of office and they decided to found the Carter Center in Atlanta. Then they asked the question, “What next? We’ve got this building, we’ve got this center, what are we going to use it for?” They decided that one project they would take on was trying to eradicate guinea worm disease. At that point there were well more than 3 million people in the world afflicted with guinea worm disease. They put their shoulder to the wheel to working in the cause of eliminating that blight. Now, across the world, there are only 20 cases of guinea worm disease.

There’s a James who learned something about how the axis of the world didn’t go through the center of his head. It wasn’t about power and prestige, it was about self-giving care for others. Judging by the fact that he was still hammering nails for Habitat for Humanity into his 90’s—and may be hammering them still—that lesson took.

The original James, the brother of John in today’s text, is only mentioned by himself one time in all of scripture. All of the other times its James and John, James and John, James and John. As an older brother myself, I kind of resent that.

The one time James is mentioned all by himself, apart from John being present with him, is in the book of Acts, chapter 12. “About that time King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword.”

² Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (Jossey-Bass, 2011)

James, the first of the twelve disciples to be martyred.

Later in that same chapter, Herod, who put James to death, is being applauded in a large forum. The people of Tyre and Sidon have come to ask Herod a favor. And when on an appointed day, Herod puts on his royal robes and takes his seat on the platform, and delivers a public address to them, the people keep shouting, "The voice of a God, and not of a man!"

Because Herod won't give glory to God, Acts says, he falls over, gets eaten by worms, and then dies. I'd rather die and **then** get eaten by worms.

The book of Acts is trying to make a point there about the sort of life that's worth living. It's not a self-centered one. It's a God-centered one, one that moves outside of self to care for others.

In Jesus' name. Amen.