

Saint James of Jerusalem: October 24, 2010
Sermon presented by the Rev. Dr. Julia Gatta

St. James' Church, Parkton, Maryland

There's no doubt about it: families are complicated. We know that from our own experience growing up and from our continued relationship to our parents and siblings even into adulthood. Of course, we **do** get to *choose* our spouse, but even that relationship is fraught with—shall we say, unpredictabilities? We certainly don't get to choose our parents, siblings, or our children. We just live with them; and for better or worse, learn the slow process of getting along with one another, if possible.

Today the Church is celebrating, and this parish in particular is celebrating, St. James of Jerusalem, the brother of Jesus. We can imagine that the relationship between Jesus and his younger brother, James, involved all the complications of siblings in any family—with a few extra difficulties thrown in. In fact, St. Mark's Gospel reports that at any early point in Jesus' ministry in Galilee, his family came to visit him in Capernaum—which is a bit of a trek from Nazareth, the place where Jesus had grown up and where, presumably, most of the family still lived. St. Mark tells us that the family came to “restrain” Jesus. People had told them he was no longer in his right mind. He wasn't acting at all like the Jesus they had known back home: there was all this teaching and healing and not a few confrontations with key people in power, and the family was afraid for his safety. So the crowd standing outside Jesus' home in Capernaum informs him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” It's quite a family delegation, and they've come to make what we'd call an “intervention.” Everyone would have been expecting Jesus to give them a respectful welcome and show them the utmost courtesy and hospitality, especially since in that culture, loyalty to one's family was deemed an unquestioned duty. But Jesus does not even acknowledge them. He turns to those gathered about him, and instead declares, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (Mk. 3: 31ff). What a slap in the face! And his own family, too.

If we read the gospels attentively, we notice that none of Jesus' family members are ever mentioned as his disciples. They are, for the most part, invisible, part of the backdrop from which he comes. As we heard in our gospel lesson, sometimes those who challenged Jesus, or who wondered how he ever came to speak with the kind of authority and conviction that he everywhere manifests, mention his undistinguished family as being not at all the sort of people who might produce a religious leader of any stature. When the family does show up, they, like the disciples themselves, typically misunderstand what Jesus is about. Until the end—the very end of the story. And then they start to come into focus. In St. John's Gospel, we see Mary at the foot of the cross. She is simply there, silent in her grief, but Jesus speaks to her and the beloved disciple, who takes Mary into his home after Jesus has given her to him as his mother. St. Luke tells us that Mary and Jesus' brothers formed part of the community that waited in prayer after the ascension of the Lord for the coming of the Spirit. And St. Paul mentions, in the reading from First Corinthians that we heard this morning, that Jesus appeared to his brother,

James, after the resurrection. All these events profoundly change Jesus' family and change their relationship to him. They come to believe in Jesus—their Jesus—as the Messiah. They become his mother and brothers and sisters on the same footing as ourselves—not by blood, but through faith. Together with them we are members of the household of God: a blended family, if ever there was one.

James of Jerusalem—your James—quickly rose to a position of leadership among the apostles. Although he was not one of the original Twelve, the apostles recognized in him a depth of integrity that won him the respect of friend and foe alike. He was known as “James the Just” because he embodied the holiness, disciplines of prayer, and unimpeachable virtue that always characterize authentic leadership in the Church. As head of the Church in Jerusalem, he was that church's first bishop—a position he held for almost thirty years until his martyrdom in 62 AD. His pastoral authority was so great that both Peter and Paul come to him and the other elders of the church to deal with the vexing matter of admitting non-Jews into the Christian fold. This was an issue that was not settled during Jesus' earthly ministry—for Jesus' ministry was almost entirely among his own Jewish people--and so the early church, faced with an unprecedented situation, had to wrestle with this question. Some thought Gentile converts had to keep the Law of Moses, just as Jesus, the apostles, and the earliest Jewish Christians did. Others, like Paul, thought the Law of Moses could be set aside in the case of Gentile converts since faith in Jesus was sufficient for them. James takes a middle position, requiring Gentile converts only to keep from eating meat sacrificed in pagan temples and to observe basic ethical precepts. James' reconciling temper shines through the reading from the Acts of the Apostles that we heard, and it is clear from the story that all present agreed with the wisdom of his judgment.

The account of the Council of Jerusalem, as it is called, gives us clues about some graceful ways to negotiate differences in the family of Christ, the Church. When there is a problem or when something really new seems to be afoot, everyone comes together to decide how to go forward. No one simply strikes out on his own, consulting no one but himself. They realize that they need each other even if they don't yet see eye-to-eye. Each speaks honestly and temperately about how grace has been perceived to be at work among them. James listens carefully to all, and then sums up his own position as one way to take into account the best in each argument. Circumcision, what you ate, and who you ate it with were extremely volatile issues in the first century: people defined themselves around these sorts of things. Yet the Church did not break up over these divisive matters, thanks in large part to James—his generosity of spirit, his clarity of vision, and his respect for all. He became Jesus' brother in every way.

Family language abounds in the New Testament to describe members of the Church. According to the Epistle to the Hebrews, Jesus “is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters.” If in the gospels Jesus seems to slam the door on his natural family, it's only to open the door to us: “Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” He welcomes us into the family of God—just as he welcomed Mary, and James, and his other family members after the

resurrection. It wasn't to be distant from them that he insists on this new way of defining family, but rather to be close to us all. If in the church we have trouble getting along as siblings, it is perhaps because we failed to recognize that it is Jesus who makes us brothers and sisters to each other in the first place. His relationship to us creates our relationship to each other.

For James, as for Paul, coming to know the Risen Christ was everything. It changed what he thought was important in life; it changed how he looked on other people; it changed what he thought about God; it changed his sense of himself and his purpose in life. It made him willing to die for Jesus because death was no longer the ultimate threat. Seeing the risen Lord must have given him hope, patience, and perspective.

This is the first time in three years that I have been in this country to celebrate the Feast of James of Jerusalem. Last year, and the year before that, I was in Jerusalem on October 23, helping to lead (along with another Sewanee professor) a pilgrimage of pastors and priests to the Holy Land. It was, of course, moving to be in Jerusalem on the feast day of her first bishop, and I particularly loved the liturgy at the Armenian Cathedral of St. James, which claims to house the relics of St. James himself. All that on top of visiting the places in Galilee and Jerusalem associated with Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection. It was inspiring to join with pilgrims from all over the world as we prayed at those holy sites, made venerable by centuries of devotion. Yet I also came to realize as never before that you can pray anywhere. However stirring it may be on occasion to worship in great cathedrals or memorable historical sites, Christ is as fully present to us when we come back to the parish family, his family—the folks we know face-to-face, the people we come to love, whose burdens and joys we bear—and yes, the people who sometimes irritate us, too. Hey, we're family. The risen Lord always goes before us. We meet him here in this Eucharist as surely as in Jerusalem. It is a grace that awaits us at every turn. The experience of encountering the risen Lord transformed those who saw him, including James, his brother twice over. For this is the supper of the Lamb, the banquet of the Age to Come, and it is meant to transform us, the family of Christ.