

Rev. Kurt Cockran, Risen Savior Lutheran Church (Basehor, KS), St. James, October 22nd and 23rd, 2022

Sinner James to St. James

Matthew 13:54-58; James 1:1-12

Grace, mercy, and peace to you,

Before he was St. James of Jerusalem, he was Sinner James of Nazareth. At least we're pretty sure. There's some debate since so many people had the name James. But the evidence is good enough for our purposes to assume. We hear about the brothers of Jesus a number of times throughout the Gospels. You all, of course, by virtue of your baptisms are brothers of Christ. That shows us already there's a certain broadness to the term brother all throughout history. College fraternities and even gangs call one another brothers despite not being biologically related. Lot, technically Abraham's nephew, is once in the story called Abraham's brother.

So we hear about these specific four brothers of Christ in the Gospels, one of whom is James. These are most likely a part of his close family circle in Nazareth, even possibly half-brothers through Joseph. Under the same roof, or cousins in the same neighborhood. And when these "brothers" show up, they call to him from outside the crowd. They want him to stop making a show of himself and stop wandering around Judea and come back home to the family. It says, "when his family heard it [what he was saying and doing], they went out to seize him, for they were saying, "He is out of his mind." They see Jesus as just simply one of them: just a man, just their family member. Not a prophet. Certainly not the Messiah, not God. Yeah, probably pretty wild that he's never lied or stolen, but he's one of us. Jesus truly did empty himself, humbled his divinity when he was growing up in Nazareth. As far as we can tell, He saved His miracle-working for his adult ministry. He learned like one of them, ate like one of them, became sick even, like one of them. He's just our good ol' local Jesus. The family in another place even hosted Jesus and his disciples at one time, as though the disciples were just Jesus' best friends.

But things change as his ministry continues. As opposition to him in the community grows, these brothers want Jesus gone, lest they perish in a conspiracy to kill even the family of Jesus.¹ We can be a brother of Jesus, but as long as it's easy. Save the cost of discipleship talk. Save the take up your cross and follow me talk. I'll take your multiplying bread and drinking your wine at the weddings, but count me out for having to suffer for the sake of your name, of being crucified with you. Sounds familiar.

Jesus is our brother. Truly. The Son of God had to descend to this earth and be made like man in every respect, yet without sin. This is the only way that Jesus could be the propitiation for our sin. He had to be one of us, sharing in our flesh and blood. He had to suffer like one of us, so that He is able to help us when we suffer the afflictions of this world. He didn't come to save angels, or cows, or the birds. He came to save mankind. He came to save you. Flesh and blood you, his fraternal blood-brothers. He had to be one of you, one of us.

Which means that he had to suffer like us. The effects of this sinful world are why we suffer. The wages of sin is death. He needed to experience it all. James may not have wanted to suffer with Jesus at first, but he watched as the brother he grew up alongside was abandoned by his once-loyal gang, scorned by the crowd, mocked, spit upon, flogged, beaten, crucified. The people said, "He trusts in the Lord; let him deliver him;" James would reply "But my brother Jesus said *he* is the Lord, yet he's not delivering himself. Why would this be?" Why? So that Jesus could take his earthly brother and transform him into a son of God, just as He is the Son of God, James becoming a true *spiritual* brother. And this gets confirmed to James when Jesus appeared *specifically* to James. It's a blink and you miss it moment in 1 Corinthians, but amid all of the Easter Resurrection appearances of the Risen Christ, it says Jesus appeared also

¹ Inferred from Jn 7:5.

specifically to James. When James' brother rose from the dead, that changed everything for him. Just as Peter needed to be restored for denying Jesus, so also James needed to be wholly converted, and converted he was. Jesus forgave him. Transformed from thinking his brother is crazy, not believing him for so long, and even trying to stop him, to a fellow believer and confessor in the Resurrection, even one of the main pillars of the church alongside Peter and Paul.

But also imagine the hurdle for James. He had to believe not merely that his earthly brother is God, but even that Sinner James of Nazareth could be *allowed* to be considered St. James. Could there really be room in the Kingdom for someone with a past like mine?

Perhaps that's your struggle as well. The skeletons in your closet, the sins that still haunt your mind, the past that always seems to follow you around, recalled at the worst of times. Your past has plenty of regrets, every one of you. Admit it, part of even why you're accepted casually by so many is because only so many truly knows your past. It's all just too much.

Or maybe your struggle isn't with your past but with your present. The sins that you're stuck in now, the sin you can't seem to shake. The anger and bitterness, the doubts, the immorality, your love of the things of this world, your weaknesses, failures to pray, all your failings, every last one of your failings, your failings to care for others. [You may have come here for a wedding, but you also joined us here moments ago to confess your sins.] You poor, miserable sinner. How can there be room in the Kingdom for someone like you, you, a James of Nazareth.

How can there be room? Because your flesh and blood brother, Jesus, was raised. He assumed your sin. By dying, He destroyed death, and was raised. Assuming the sin of James,

assuming your sin. And rose! So that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

This is a free gift. That you are in Christ Jesus by being gifted the *washing* of Christ Jesus. James moved from sinful Nazareth to become St. James of Jerusalem. You move from your sinful place to being a citizen saint of the New Jerusalem! James was transformed. *You* are transformed. From sinner to saint, from death to life, from wretchedness to blessedness, from slave to servant, from the conquered sheep being slaughtered to the one who is more than a conqueror through Him who loves us. From a despiser of suffering to one who counts it all joy when meeting affliction, knowing the result is always good, always completing you, perfecting you through Him who suffered for you first, *and was raised* ahead of you. You will always be raised.

Remember Psalm 22. We often think of this psalm simply as the Maundy Thursday / Good Friday psalm, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? All who see me mock me, they make mouths at me; they wag their heads.” Who’s speaking? David at first, and eventually these are made Jesus’ words. But there’s a verse way at the end of that Psalm that’s worth hearing: *Jesus says*, I, Jesus, will tell of *your* name to *my* brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.” Who is the “you” that he’s talking to? The book of Hebrews tells us plainly. He’s talking to you, the people of God! You who not only confess Jesus as your brother, but are truly adopted into the family of God by baptism, Jesus in Psalm 22 is talking to you. “I, Jesus, will tell of *your* name to *my* brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.” This fits with what Jesus says, that “everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven.” I will tell of your name all you saints. I

will acknowledge you. I will *praise* you and your faith to all of my brothers. In the midst of the congregation.” He is not ashamed to call you His brothers, because you are truly a child of God.