

October 23, 2022

St. James of Jerusalem

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

There's a saying that perhaps you've heard before: "familiarity breeds contempt." It's a phrase that means that the more you're around someone, the easier time you have thinking poorly of him. It's sort of like taking someone for granted. You get used to all the good things about him, and then you only notice the bad, or what you perceive as bad.

When this happens between people, it's very harmful to their relationship. When it happens between us and Jesus, it's very harmful to our saving faith.

Thankfully, God acts, strongly and often, to shake us out of this contempt and bring us back to the realization of the priceless blessings He gives to us.

Looking to the Scriptures to see what this all looks like, one example we're given is that of St. James. Now, before he was known as St. James the Just, Bishop of Jerusalem, before he was martyred for the faith, James was something else.

He was the brother, not of John – that's a different James – but of Jesus. He grew up sharing a roof, probably a bedroom, with Christ Himself. James would have been raised by Joseph and Mary, perhaps learning the carpenter's trade alongside Jesus, playing games in the streets of Nazareth alongside his brothers and sisters and their friends.

Think about what that must have been like. At first, we might think it would be great! Wise men came to your house! Angels talked to your parents! Your brother is the promised Messiah! No other kids in the marketplace can brag about such things!

But... the more you think about it, especially looking back to your own childhood and family life and how siblings interact, you can see how it might have been less than great, especially considering that even as children, we're sinners. We don't know just how much Joseph and Mary spoke about Jesus to the other children, but it would be hard not to be jealous that Jesus had angels sing at His birth, and wise men worshiped Him and gave a bunch of expensive gifts to Him, and the Holy Spirit gave His mother a special song concerning Him (which we still sing to this day: the Magnificat.)

It also had to be really irritating that Jesus never would join in the rule-breaking and name-calling alongside James and the other kids. Jesus always listened to His parents. Jesus always did His chores. Jesus always cleaned up His plate. Jesus made everyone else look bad.

This would all be true because, even as a child, Jesus was the sinless Son of God. Jesus was perfect, even though He never showed off or displayed His glory before His Baptism in the Jordan.

This lack of visible glory or power would have been yet another thing which James' sinful flesh clung to. Aside from being a "goody-two-shoes" in James' eyes, Jesus wouldn't have appeared all that special. He grew up as just an ordinary boy in Nazareth. He ate His food, took His naps, went to synagogue, did His chores, lived an ordinary life in first century Roman Palestine.

There was nothing in His day-to-day life suggesting that He was the Creator of the universe or Lord of the nations. As Isaiah had foretold centuries before, "he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him."

And it wasn't just James who thought this. Later, when Jesus had begun His public ministry, His entire hometown refused to believe that He was anything special. Listen to their words: "Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?"

Being in a small town, having seen Jesus grow up as one of them, no one ever saw Him as anything special. And then for Him to come declaring that He was the fulfillment of Scripture, as Luke's recording of this event says; it was too much. "This guy thinks he's God's gift to mankind!"

Their familiarity, their trusting their own senses and feelings over Jesus' words and the words of Scripture, led to their contempt of Him.

This familiarity breeding contempt is a pretty easy thing to carry over to our lives as Christians. Many of you were baptized as infants, being Christians almost your entire lives, and for others, God worked through His Word to call you to faith a while ago.

Life as a Christian just seems like, well, nothing special. You wake up, go to work or school, work around the house, run errands, eat meals, wash dishes, pay bills, go to bed, and do it all over and over again. Perhaps every now and again you get a glimpse of God at work in your life, but it usually seems pretty small and is easy to write off as just "dumb luck" by anyone watching from the outside.

The reality is that you are a child of the Most High God, that Jesus Christ is your Lord and brother, that you cannot die because Christ has defeated death for you... but that's not something that's visible from the outside, or always felt emotionally on the inside. Often, you might wonder if there really is anything special about being a Christian.

This life as a Christian, an existence that is glorious but hidden among the ordinary, can be seen in a snapshot of sorts in our gathering as Christians on Sunday morning. The reality of what happens here is nothing less than miraculous.

God, speaking through a pastor, forgives your sins, wipes away whatever stains have built up on your conscience and gives you His unbreakable word that you have a right standing before Him.

He then speaks to you through His Word, which He has miraculously preserved throughout the ages, and which He infuses with His almighty power, such that you are hearing the very words of God, just as if you were present at the Sermon on the Mount or on the shores of the Sea of Galilee with Jesus.

Having heard this Word of God, you join with your brothers and sisters in Christ to bring your prayers, your needs, your desires, your thanksgivings, before the throne of the Almighty God, who listens to each and every one of them, even those which you only say in your heart.

And then, the Lord Jesus tears the veil between heaven and earth and comes down to physically be with His people in bread and wine, and as He comes, He drags heaven with Him, so to speak. Angels and archangels and all the saints, including those loved ones who have died in the faith, they are there, because they are with Jesus, and Jesus is there.

Finally, the Lord puts His name and His blessing on you as you depart, just as He did to His people through Aaron nearly three and a half millennia ago. That's the Divine Service on Sunday morning.

Except, outwardly, you can't see that. Sunday morning appears very ordinary, especially to your sinful flesh. You show up and sit in the pew, and sing some hymns that you've maybe sung before, or maybe not, but they don't sound like the music that's popular outside the church walls. Then you say some words that you say every week, and your minds starts to wander.

You hear some readings from the Bible that you've heard before, and then you listen to a sermon which may or may not be engaging at all. After the pastor prays and you think about the prayers, or sort of zone out, it's time for Communion. Jesus says it's His body and blood, but it sure doesn't seem very powerful or glorious. Just wafers and wine, according to your senses.

Shortly after this, the whole things wraps up and you can go home to enjoy your afternoon. That's how the Divine Service appears to the flesh, how the old sinful man in each of us looks at it.

This can all be quite familiar as time goes on. Sunday after Sunday, week after week, year after year. And as we said before, familiarity breeds contempt. The devil, the world, and your sinful flesh will try to get you to look down on the worship of the Church and the life of faith.

You've heard the Bible stories before, why do you have to go again this Sunday? Why does God tell you to live a life where you don't get to have the fun you want and go along with the rest of the world? Why does God have you sacrifice certain parts of your life, when everyone else who doesn't go to church, or only goes every once in a while, seems to be having their lives go along just fine? Why is God burdening me?

Just like how James, Jesus' own brother, didn't believe in Him at first, we who are in the presence of Jesus and receive His heavenly, eternal blessings are constantly tempted to look in contempt on Him, or see His gifts as ordinary, of no great value. And when we do this, contempt for our Savior isn't far away.

Thanks be to God, though, that He doesn't just leave us in this contempt. He doesn't just walk away from us, leave us to our own destruction when we take His gifts for granted. No, He calls us back. He continued to call His own brother, James, back to Him.

We aren't told exactly how and when James started believe, but we do know that Jesus appeared to James after the resurrection, and that James soon after is a leader in the new Church in Jerusalem. In the letter he wrote, James does speak to us about how God works to bring us back, and it might be a bit of a surprise. "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness."

James, or really the Holy Spirit speaking through James, tells us that God uses trials to test and strengthen our faith. And he would know what he's talking about there, guiding the Church in Jerusalem through the great persecution that breaks out against it, serving to reconcile a great conflict that arises in the Church (which we read about in Acts 15), and finally being put to death for the confession of Jesus. Persecution, division, death – James says that we should count these all as joy.

Why would James say that? What could possibly be good about enduring such suffering and trials? Well, what is it that makes you appreciate the ordinary, the things or the people that you might take for granted? Often times, it's when you lose them, or come close.

Eating dinner together as a family every night might seem to get old and be an inconvenience, but once there's an empty seat at the table, you realize what a wonderful thing that "ordinary" event was. We just take our daily bread as a given, assuming there will always be food on the table and a roof over our head, but those who have gone without can tell you what a blessing it truly is.

And especially, we just assume that tomorrow will always be there, that you'll wake up to do it all again tomorrow, that life will always go on, at least for a little bit. The fact is, though, you and I will die. It may not be as violent as St. James' martyrdom, but it will be death nonetheless. And there's no stopping it.

Faced with these trials, with our own mortality, we are humbled, forced to look away from our own riches and abilities and desires, and cling all the more tightly to Christ. He is the God who gives us wisdom to realize what truly matters.

He lets us treasure those portions of Scripture that we recite every week in the liturgy, so that when tragedy strikes, or when the devil tempts us, or when time beings to take its toll on our minds and bodies, the comfort of God's Word stays with us.

His Spirit enables us to live as Christians, living our lives in light of eternity, not chasing the world's things that wither like grass or perish like flowers but seeking to lay up treasures in heaven.

He is the one who grants us the faith to know that the wine we drink at the altar is His real, actual, blood, the same blood that washes away our sins.

By this God-given wisdom and faith, we can face all the trials of this life, because whatever happens and whatever the devil throws at us we have a crown of life already waiting for us in heaven, secured for us by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

By this wisdom and faith, we can see the seemingly ordinary things of God as those which truly matter. St. James shows us this.

Notice how he starts his letter: not by saying that he is bishop and overseer in Jerusalem or even that he is the earthly brother of Jesus. No, he states that he is a servant, a slave, of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.

He no longer sees Jesus as just an ordinary, worldly brother, but as his Master, as the Lord. His focus isn't on those days that they spent in the house in Nazareth, but on the eternity which he will spend in the Almighty Father's house, where his brother and Lord has prepared a place for him. And because of this understanding, which his divine brother and Lord gave to Him, James can face all manner of trials, even death, and do so with joy.

For the sake of Jesus, you too have been adopted into the household of God and made heirs of His kingdom. With St. James, you too are brothers and sisters of the Lord Jesus, in your everyday life here on earth, and in eternal splendor forever.

What appears ordinary in this life will be revealed to be glorious and unfading in the life to come, where you and all the saints will live in the presence of Christ for all eternity.

In the name of Jesus, amen.