

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
5327 W. Washington Blvd.
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

St. James the Elder, Apostle
July 25, 2004
Mark 10:35-45

“Dying to Serve”

by the Rev. Mark E. Wangerin
Associate Pastor

Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Introduction

Today, the church calendar allows us to consider a day somewhat different than the normal Sundays after Pentecost. July 25 is set aside in the church as the day of St. James the Elder, Apostle and as we have done already in this service so here we shall consider what we can learn from one of the first apostles of our Lord Jesus. In so doing we shall especially consider the words of our Lord in the appointed Gospel for this day under the theme “Dying to Serve.” May the Lord bless us as we hear his Word.

I. James the Elder in History and Legend

As I was preparing for this sermon, I looked at several sources to understand something of the reason for this day in the church year and also to get a grasp concerning what we know of St. James. Scripture records that there are several James mentioned in the New Testament. There is this James, the son of Zebedee, the brother of John, who is known as James the Greater or St. James Major, or St. James the elder to distinguish him from James Minor, James the Less, James the son of Alphaeus who is also called by the Lord as an apostle. Of course, then there is also James, the brother of the Lord, who plays a prominent role in the book of Acts as the first leader of the church in Jerusalem.

It might appear that the name “James” was very popular at the time of Jesus, and it was, but we must recognize that the name that was popular was “Jacob”. In the Greek, this name is recorded as Iakobos, which made it to the Latin as Iacobus, as well as into the German by the same name. So we have a St. Jacobi Lutheran Church in Milwaukee (Wisconsin Synod on the south side) as well as a St. James Lutheran Church (Wisconsin Synod and our near neighbor). In the French is it Jacques, in the Italian, Giacomo, in the Spanish, Iago or Diego. Don’t ask me how you get James from Iakobos (I read an article which does do that but it is too much to explain here).

In any event, San Diego, California, is named for St. James as well as the great Spanish pilgrimage city of Santiago di Compostella (and therefore also Santiago, Chile). There was a legend that James came to Spain and preached the Gospel there. Compostella was a favorite site for Christian pilgrims to visit in the Middle Ages. For here the supposed relics of St. James were said to be found. Indeed, the reason this date is set aside to commemorate St. James is because it is the supposed date when his relics were transferred to Santiago di

Compostella. Just one more point of historical trivia. On the bulletin cover you see the shield or symbol of James the Elder. It is composed of three scallop shells symbolizing pilgrimage. Just as you might pick up some sea shells on the journey as a souvenir, so that is what the shells symbolize—though Christian writers have said they are to remind us of James' pilgrimage, his zeal and missionary spirit.

II. James, Apostle and Martyr

Enough of that background. Scripture tells us much of James as well. He is one of the "big three" of the disciples. Jesus often takes Peter, James, and John with him. Most notably they are present at the Mount of Transfiguration as well as at the home of Jairus when Jesus raises his daughter. They also are the closest with the Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Yet interestingly, two other incidents in the Gospels do not exactly place James or John in the most favorable light. They ask the Lord to send down fire on a Samaritan village which refused to receive Jesus. The Lord rebuked their request. It is not without cause that Jesus calls James and John, Boanerges (the sons of thunder). In the Gospel which was read for this day, James and John are also seen as requesting that they be given the positions of honor at Jesus' right and left hand in glory. To which Jesus replies, "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?"³⁹ "We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with,⁴⁰ but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared." Now perhaps they were not completely aware of what Jesus was telling them both but the Epistle for this day records the fulfillment of these words as it relates: It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them.² He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. (Acts 12) This took place about the year 44 according to most biblical historians. And so James became the second named martyr of the Christian Church after Stephen.

III. Dying to Serve

And from this incident we get the theme for this morning's message: Dying to Serve. For James it was literally true. In spite of the many things we know of him, we still know very little of his life and ministry. But we know this one thing for sure, he gave his life for the Lord. He was baptized into the Lord's death. He drank the cup of suffering just as the Lord had foretold. And in the process becomes one of the first of a long line of Christian martyrs.

Now such talk might indeed be a little disconcerting to us. We sit comfortably in these pews (or listen on the radio) It may be a little hard to picture the idea of persecution or even death for the sake of following Jesus. But that reality must be ever before us. The Lord Jesus reminds us that we must take up our cross and follow him. That is not always the easiest thing to do. And there have been plenty of martyrs who have faced death for the sake of

Jesus. We would pray that God would keep us faithful and that we might never face such a challenge.

Yet when speaking of "dying to serve" we must never forget the One who makes it possible to do just that. Indeed it is for Jesus sake that we may even be forced to die. And it is Jesus who in the closing verses of our Gospel reminds us of his great sacrifice. "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ⁴³ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

He gave His life. He ransomed us from sin, from death, from the power of the devil. He died to serve. And it is Jesus who then calls us to serve as well. In our lives we should see that service is a Christian virtue. It does not matter who is the greatest. It matters not who has the greatest riches or honor. It matters instead that we serve. For the Lord Jesus served us in his death and we follow him. That indeed is what James, son of Zebedee, brother of John, son of thunder, did in his life and ministry. That is most assuredly what he did in his death.

As the writer to the Hebrews says, Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. For you see, we too should be dying to serve. As we sang before in the hymn of the day:

A glorious band, the chosen few,
On whom the Spirit came,
Twelve valiant saints; their hope they knew
And mocked the cross and flame
They met the tyrant's brandished steel,
The lion's gory mane;
They bowed their necks the death to feel—
Who follows in their train?

A noble army, men and boys,
The matron and the maid,
Around the Savior's throne rejoice,
In robes of light arrayed.
They climbed the steep ascent of heav'n
Through peril, toil, and pain.
O God, to us may grace be giv'n
To follow in their train!

In Jesus' Name. Amen.