

It struck me as I was preparing this week for this sermon on our patronal festival day that each year, we do St. James a terrible disservice because every year we hear the same gospel reading and it doesn't really put him in a good light. And St. James is one of the... he's a very important, I mean, all the disciples were important, but there was 12 and then there was three, James, Peter and John who witnessed the transfiguration. I mean, James went on to be the first martyr of the disciples. So he's a very important character in the gospels.

And yet each year we hear this story about him. In fact, there's two versions. In Mark's Gospel, it's James and his brother John who come to Jesus and say, "Jesus, can we have the best seats in the kingdom, please?" But Matthew comes a bit later, wants to show the disciples a bit more respect. So, in Matthew's version, it's the mother of James and John who comes to Jesus and says, "Can my boys have the best seats in the kingdom, please?" Either way, it's not a good look for St. James.

Every year we hear this story of St. James, the power hungry and entitled mama's boy. And I don't think this caricature does him justice. There's much more to St. James than that, but we only hear that little snippet. We bopped James in by only ever hearing that story every year. So, I want to liberate St. James today and set him alongside what St. Paul says about all the saints in general. But before I do that, it just occurred to me that we might feel boxed in or constrained in a way that we do to St. James. We might feel that there are stories told about us or labels or names attached to us that constrain us, that hem us in, that don't tell the whole story of who we are. Things might define us in a way that we don't want to be defined.

Now, I've said this before, you'll know what a scarring experience this was for me. My first kindergarten report, "Mark is a big and clumsy boy," labeled for life. Every time I dropped something, it was always, "Oh, teacher was right, you're a big and clumsy boy." We'll all have equivalents. Oh, they're the black sheep of the family. Oh, she's not very academic. Oh, none of their relationships ever work out. You'll know the stories that people tell that hem us in. And I've realized recently that I do the same for my son, Jacob.

When he was a freshman at university, he had an exam at the end of his first semester and he'd spent that semester majoring in partying with a minor in carousing. And he came out of the exam hall at the end of that first term and he turned to his friend and said, "Gah, that was a hard exam, wasn't it?" His friend said, "Well, no, not really. It was easy. All the answers were in the textbook." To which my son replied, "What, there was a textbook?" Now, I love

to tell that story because it's funny and it's actually true, but I recognize when I've told it a few times recently in company with Jacob there that he doesn't like it. I can see him cringing because he's moved on. He doesn't understand. He doesn't see himself as that sort of frat boy anymore. He's a serious professional. He doesn't like it when his dad brings up stories from the past. So, I learned when preparing this sermon that I need to stop telling that story. This might be the last time it ever gets told, but at least it's recorded. It's there for posterity.

And I invite you to reflect on whether you feel misunderstood because other people, family or friends, tell stories about you that hem you in or give you a label or a name that doesn't describe who you are. It might have at one time, but we grow as people. We change. Or we might be the ones that are inadvertently labeling someone else, telling stories about them that constrain them. Maybe we are the ones holding somebody else back. So let's think if there's someone we can liberate or maybe we are the ones that need to be liberated and we need to have a word with someone and say, "Please don't say that anymore."

So let me move on and free St. James from that terrible story that we hear every year and see him instead in the context of what St. Paul writes to the church in Ephesus, where we heard this in our epistle for today. "I pray that you being rooted and grounded in love, I pray that you may have the power to comprehend with St. James and all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge."

Paul, as he does at other times, seems to run away with himself and just puts word upon word upon. But his meaning is clear that God's love is limitless, that it's beyond measure. He writes something similar in Romans chapter eight, and again, he seems to just run away with words. "Knowing all these things," Paul writes, "we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I'm convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers nor height, nor depth nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

It's a big theme in Paul's writings is God's love for us, that love made known perfectly in the revelation of Jesus Christ and in his death on the cross. Paul writes passionately about God's love for us. And you can tell the passion because he seems to just, he can't use the words, get enough words out to describe what he means. And of course, that's because no words can sum up, encapsulate

the wonder, the breadth, the scale of God's love for us in Christ Jesus.

There's a story I like to tell about a young man who was in Hong Kong a few years ago, and he got caught up into drugs and he got lured into the city and his life took a rather sour turn and he ended up making a living out of selling drugs. But after a few years, things went south, and he attracted the attention of a rival gang, and he was being pursued and he needed to hide. He didn't know where to go. There was no safe place in the city. So, he thought, "Well, I'll write to my parents. I've treated them badly. I haven't seen them for years, but they were always good to me. I'll see if they'll take me back for a bit."

So, he didn't want to presume upon their kindness, so he wrote them a letter and said, "Look, I'm in a spot of bother. I need to lie low for a bit. If I can stay with you, great. If you don't want me there, that's fine. And to make it easy, if you'll have me back for a bit, then tie a ribbon on the tree at the bottom of the garden so when I come to the village, I'll see, and if there's no ribbon, I won't bother you."

So, he's coming into town on the train and he's a bit nervous. He doesn't know whether there'll be a ribbon on the tree or not, doesn't know what his next move's going to be. And as he turns the corner and looks out of the window, he sees the tree at the end of the garden, and it hasn't got a ribbon on. It's got hundreds of ribbons all over the tree and his heart breaks because he knows that the love his parents had for him is still there. The parents didn't use words to communicate their love for their son. They used ribbons, but he got the message that went way beyond what words could say.

And we too as Christians have a symbol that goes beyond words to express God's limitless love for His people, for us. And that symbol is the cross. The cross is the ultimate demonstration of God's un-surpassing love for us and all His people. It reveals how far God in Christ was prepared to go, to show us, to demonstrate that love that He has for each one of us. He held literally nothing back. St. Paul says in Romans, "But God proves His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

I heard about a prisoner once who was in prison for their faith and he ended up being executed. And when the prison guards went into his cell to clear it out, they saw a big cross scrawled on the wall, and at the top of the cross it said height. And at the bottom of the cross it said depth. And on either flank, it said length and height, or whatever the one is that I missed out. But the prisoner was sustained by the image of the cross as an image of God's

amazing unconditional love, which has no end to its height or depth, its length or its breadth.

Which leads me to say one final thing that I want to draw out of this passage, which is Paul's prayer that his readers be rooted and grounded in love. He's mixing his metaphors terribly here, but we'll forgive him that because he's got something very important to say. Rooted is an image obviously drawn from nature. Paul's saying that just as the roots of a tree sink deep into the earth in search of nutrients and stability, so the love of Christ nourishes and stabilizes us, the believer. We're to develop strong roots so that we can be sustained by the endless love that God has for us in Christ Jesus. That's where our roots are to be if we're really to flourish. And our roots go deeper than the mere traditions of the church, they go deeper than the doctrine of the church. We are called to go deeper and to put our roots down into the soil of divine love. That's where true strength comes from, which will sustain us in life's vicissitudes.

Paul also says that we're to be grounded in love, which is a metaphor he's got from the building trade. Being grounded speaks of a solid foundation. The love of God in Christ provides us with a solid foundation on which we can build our life. And many of us try different foundations. There are plenty of options available. We can try and build on good works, being a good person, doing the right thing, all in an attempt to receive God's love. But the great message of grace that we proclaim each week is that the foundation is already laid. It's there. We don't earn God's love. We're simply called to receive it and build our life upon it.

Remember what Paul says, "That while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." And let's remember that as we come forward this morning to receive Communion. We come with open hands, ready to receive. We come with open hearts, and what we receive are tokens of God's limitless love. We will hear again the story of the cross on which God in Christ proved his love for us, and we welcome everyone to receive Communion because that's a sign for us that God's love has no bounds, that his sacrifice on the cross was for all people, that we are all included. No one is beyond the bounds of God's love in Christ Jesus. And I pray this morning that you will have the power to comprehend with St. James and all the saints, the breadth, the length, the height, the depth of God's love for us in Christ Jesus.

Amen.