

Happy St. James Day. We've had to find a different place to record the sermon for today, because there's a Vacation Bible School going on, on campus and there's nowhere that isn't overrun by children at the moment, which is wonderful. I'm hoping to record this just in a few moments quiet, because an ice-cream van has just arrived outside of church. So, I'm pretty confident that it's going to be quiet for at least 20 minutes or so. I've realized this week that as I've started to feel a bit sorry for St. James, our patron saint we remember today. It was clear he was a very important disciple. He was one of the three inner circle of Jesus's group of disciples. He was the first to be martyred, and yet we know very little about him.

The only story in the gospels, in which he's the central character is the one that we've just heard read, which is not really, to be honest, a very flattering story. I wouldn't like to be remembered for a time when my mother interceded on my behalf with the boss to ask a favor, but that's how St. James is remembered in the story. It says in the gospel reading, that James's mother comes to Jesus, kneels before him and asked a favor of him. She said, "Can James and his brother sit one on your right hand and one on your left in your kingdom?" In other words, "Can my boys be the big cheeses?" And Jesus seems to react quite calmly to this request and not so the disciples. They're enraged, they're angry with the brothers.

They get angry maybe because they thought the brothers had stolen the march on them, gone in ahead of them. Maybe they thought they'd got their mothers to come and ask and make a similar request. And the argument carried on at the last supper, the night before Jesus died, St. Luke tells us that a dispute arose amongst the disciples as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. They carried on jockeying for position. The disciples were engaged in a power struggle. And we all know something about that. They were trying to boost their self-confidence, their sense of identity and worth by seeking to establish themselves as higher in the pecking order.

And we've all seen that process play out whether at work or with a family or some other context. Maybe we've been the one trying to get to the top of the pile, in which case we'll know that it doesn't work. The only way we can find peace, contentment and a healthy self-esteem is not by pursuing power, by getting to the top of the pecking order, but rather by love, or more specifically, knowing that we are loved. This is what St. Paul is writing about in that magnificent passage from Ephesians, which we've heard. If James and the other disciples had understood what St. Paul was saying there, they wouldn't have got caught up in their silly ongoing power struggles.

In this passage from Ephesians, Paul prays for the church in Ephesus. And the heart of his prayer is found in verses 18 and 19, where he writes this, "I pray that you may have the power to comprehend with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth. And to know the love of Christ that surpasses all knowledge." It's interesting, isn't it? That of all of the things that St. Paul could have prayed for, he prays that they know that God loves them. St. Paul knew that such knowledge is fundamental to the Christian life. In fact, it's the most important thing that any of us could ever know.

I was reminded a few years ago of this truth when my wife and I did a parenting teenagers course. And the first lesson of the course was about trying to make sure that our teenagers knew that we as parents love them. We were encouraged to think about various ways which we could demonstrate that love. If a teenager is to navigate the difficult teenage years and be happy and secure, then they must know that they are loved. We heard a quote from a developmental psychologist who said this, "The kids have got to know that someone is crazy about them, not crazy at them, but crazily in love with them." And what's true for teenagers, is true for all of us. Knowing, being sure that we are loved is absolutely foundational to our sense of self.

We all need to be certain that we are loved. Beneath much of the assertiveness,

competitiveness, rivalry, beneath so much self-confidence and arrogance, there is often a very insecure heart, much less sure of itself than outward behavior would lead one to believe. I love to tell the story of the young man in Hong Kong, who got caught up in the life of local gangs, and at a relatively young age left home, went to city and pursued a life in crime that made him rich. And during that time, those years away, he never thought of the family left a home. But his life turned sour, and the glamor of his criminal activity faded. He wanted to start all over again.

So, he wrote to his parents and said, "I know I haven't been in touch for a long time, and you will no doubt have some idea of what I've been up to. And I quite understand if you can't forgive me or you don't want me at home, but I'm coming back on such and such a day. And if you want to see me, then please tie a yellow ribbon around the tree at the end of the garden so that when the train goes past, I'll know whether you want me to knock on your door or not." The day came and the young man was on the train. He got nervous as the train approached his hometown. And as the train rounded the corner, he saw his house and the tree at the bottom of the garden, which was festooned, not just with one or two yellow ribbons, but hundreds. The whole tree was covered with ribbons.

And in that moment that young man got a sense, not just that his parents loved him, but of the height and depth and abundance of the love that they had for him. The key question for us isn't "How am I to find God?" Or "What can I do to make God like me or accept me?" It's no, it's this, "How can I open myself up to the love, which God has for me?" There is nothing we can do to make God love us more, nothing we could do that makes God love us less. My hope on this St. James Day, is that each of us opens ourselves up to God's love, that each of us will know how wide, how long, how high, and deep is God's love for each one of us. God, our heavenly father loves us with an overflowing abundant kind of love. And once we grasp that, we'll start to grow as Christians.

I love the phrase that Paul, uses later on in the passage here, "You being rooted and grounded in love." Two images. It's a dreadful mixed metaphor, really. One of the images is agricultural and one is architectural. "Grounded" is a technical word for the foundation of a building. St. Paul's using two images, both about security and solidity. God's love is the soil in which the plant nourishes and it's the foundation on which the building rests. May God give each of us that sense of solidity. And then we might be able to let go of the love of power and find instead the power of love, the power to serve. And then we will discover what James and the other disciples never seemed to learn, that whoever wants to be great in God's kingdom, must be a servant. Amen.