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St. James the Elder

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

## Jesu Juva

“A Remarkable Transformation”

Text: Mark 10:35-45 (Acts 11:27-12:3a)

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

James, the son of Zebedee, was one of Jesus twelve apostles. He and his brother John had been fishermen before Jesus called them to become “fishers of men.” They were known for their quick temper and impulsive nature, which caused Jesus to nickname them the “sons of thunder.” (Mk 3:17) We caught a glimpse of this impulsiveness and temper just two weeks ago, when we heard that in response to the Samaritans not welcoming Jesus, they asked “***Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from Heaven and consume them?***” (Lk 9:54) And today we heard of their bold request to Jesus for the places of honor at His right and His left. That was James and John. A little rough around the edges, to say the least.

But it was James and John, along with another rough-around-the-edges guy, Peter, who were to become Jesus’ inner circle. They were the three whom Jesus often singled out for special assignments. It was Peter, James, and John who witnessed the transfiguration. It was these three who got to go into the house of Jairus with Jesus when Jesus raised his daughter back to life from the dead. It was Peter, James, and John whom Jesus took with Him farther into the Garden of Gethsemane to pray with Him, on the night of His arrest. Despite their impulsive nature and quick temper (*or maybe because of it!*) Jesus singled them out for special attention.

But then there is a remarkable transformation in these brothers. John begins as a “son of thunder,” but winds up being called “***the disciple whom Jesus loved.***” He is entrusted with the care of Jesus’ mother Mary at the cross. He writes most eloquently of love in his epistles. . . . And then James is given the honor of being the first of Jesus’ apostles to be martyred. He is killed for his faith by King Herod, and his martyrdom is the only one of which we are told in the New Testament. Like his brother John, he had been transformed – from an impulsive, ambitious, hot-headed, glory-seeking kid, to a man willing to lay down his life in love . . . for his Saviour, for his Church, and for his friends.

That is the James that we remember today. Who did drink the cup of suffering, as Jesus

told him he would. Who became a servant and stopped seeking greatness. Who gave his life for others, following in the footsteps of Jesus. A remarkable transformation . . . which means there's hope for you and me!

It is too bad that James was martyred so early and that we don't know more about him. But perhaps it is *our lives* that complete his story. For are we not also a bit rough-around-the-edges? Too quick to judge others? At times temperamental and ambitious? If James and John had not asked for those positions of honor on Jesus' right and left, *we probably would have*. We like to be noticed. We want honor and glory too. That's why compare ourselves to others. Who has the stronger faith? Who is the most faithful? Who works the hardest in church? Pastors do it too. Who has the bigger church? The faster growing church? Who is more faithful? Perhaps *we* wouldn't be so bold as to ask, but we at least want to put ourselves in position, in the running, for those two seats of honor!

But like James and John, we don't know what we are asking, or what we are thinking, or what we are doing. Jesus' glory is not glory as we usually think of it. For His glory would come in death. His throne was His cross, His crown was of thorns, and on His right and His left were not James and John, but two criminals. The baptism Jesus received there was a baptism of fire; the cup that He drank was the cup of God's wrath against the sin of all humanity. . . . There is the greatness and glory of Christ. A greatness not in authority and power and rule – although Jesus had all of that. Rather, it is the greatness and glory of serving; the greatness and glory of love; the greatness and glory of laying down your life for another; the greatness and glory of being last, that *others* may have the places of honor.

And this is the challenge of faith – for James and John and for us. To believe in a Saviour whose greatness does not look great to the world, and to strive for a greatness that the world will never recognize as such. A greatness of love and humility; of serving and self-forgetfulness. For ***“whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.”*** And if we are honest, this is a greatness of love that we are unable to achieve. For we have trouble just loving and serving those we love, let alone those who are working against us, who hurt us, and those we do not even know. We would rather love ourselves than others; we would rather serve ourselves than others; we would rather forget about others than forget about ourselves. Yes, there is a little “son of thunder” in each of us.

But as I said before, that means there is hope for us! For as Jesus' love transformed a “son of thunder” into a martyr of love, so too does His love change and transform us. And that love, that special attention that changes us, is the cross. ***“For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.”*** And His

service to us means that our sin is forgiven. Our lust for glory, our desire for others to serve us and for positions of honor, our lack of love, our greed, our selfishness – Jesus points to all of it and makes no bones about it – *it is sin*, and nothing else. It is sin, and it condemns. It is sin, and has no place in the kingdom of God. And so it is sin that He has come to take away, that we might have a place in His kingdom. . . . And so as James and John came to realize their sin, even more so they came to see their Saviour, and the greatness of the cross. That on the cross Jesus was held responsible for their sin in their place. That through the cross, the kingdom of God had come to them. His kingdom of grace and forgiveness, even to “*sons of thunder!*” They didn’t have to earn forgiveness; they didn’t have to strive for glory; they didn’t have to take care of number one! – all was now given to them by their Saviour. He promised, and through His death and resurrection, He delivered. . . . And if this true for James and John, then how much more also for you and me. All that we are, with sin and shame, Jesus became, so that all that He is, His love and forgiveness, He could give to us. That is what happened on the cross. That is what happens to us as we believe in Him. A great exchange. A remarkable transformation.

But this special attention of our Saviour did not just happen a long time ago, but continues still today as He continues to work in us by applying His cross to our lives – not in punishment, but in love. To kill that old impulsive, ambitious, hot-tempered, glory-seeking James in each of us, and give to us a kingdom not of this world. And so there are in our lives difficulties, challenges to our faith, struggles to see the light at the end of the tunnel, times of pain and sadness, failures, confusion and questions – for our good! In order to get us to *finally* forget about ourselves, give up relying on our own abilities, and lay down our lives in faith and trust in the One who knows better. . . . That’s not easy. It wasn’t for James and it won’t be for us. Yet it is in such struggles that we are changed and transformed. Not that by these struggles we earn our salvation – absolutely not! But in exactly these struggles we are driven to Calvary, to the cross, to take refuge in Christ. To see there the one who laid down His life in true greatness and love for you and me. To see my sins and self-delusions of glory crucified with Christ, that I may rise to live a new life. To drink the cup of His blood and receive His life, for He drank our cup of suffering and received our death. And there to hear His words of freedom and release: “***Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.***” (Lk 23:34)

And so through the cross of Christ, we are given what we cannot achieve for ourselves. And we “***taste and see that the Lord is good.***” (Ps 34:8, Introit Antiphon) That the Lord is good *always* – come glory or struggle; ease or pain; joy or sorrow. Our Lord knows what we need to receive from Him, that our lives may be great and glorious in His sight. For as Jesus called the sons of thunder, knowing who they were and with a purpose for them . . . so He has called you, knowing who you are and with a purpose for you. That purpose

was fulfilled in James with martyrdom, in John with the writing of his Gospel and Epistles and in living to an old age in exile, and in you . . . well, in perhaps what is still to be seen. But one thing is for certain: that as you have been baptized into Christ, as you hear His Word, as you receive His absolution, as you eat and drink His body and blood, as you receive His love and forgiveness in all of these ways, you are being changed and transformed. And while what you will be may remain to be seen here on earth, it is fully known to God your Saviour. And He is working in you exactly what is necessary, that your glory be not in self-serving, but in self-forgetfulness. That your glory be not in being loved, but in loving others, even as Christ has loved you. That your glory be not here for a while, but there for eternity.

Is that too much for you? Too far of a leap for your sinful self? Too much for even God to work in you and your life? It was a long way for James as well, from thunder to love. But while the thunder and lightning and clouds in our lives may last for awhile – maybe even a long while – when they go away, it is the Son that remains. And so it will be for you, when you are called to take your place with the sons of thunder, James and John, beside the Son, in Heaven.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.