

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
6 August 2023

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
10th Sunday after Pentecost

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“James, Son of Alphaeus”

Ninth sermon in the summer series, “Seeing Ourselves in the Twelve”

Matthew 9:35-38, 10:1-4; Luke 6:6-16; Mark 3:7-10, 13-19; Acts 1:13-14

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

We have just a handful of disciples left to meet in our series this summer, *Seeing Ourselves in the Twelve*. Today we meet James, son of Alphaeus. And like some of the other disciples we’ve explored, we know very little about him. We only have *four scripture references* when James, son of Alphaeus is mentioned – and in each one, he’s listed as part of *the group* of Twelve – with no distinguishing characteristics beyond his father’s name. So who is James, son of Alphaeus? Inquiring minds want to know! (At least inquiring minds of preachers doing a series on Jesus’ disciples!)

Well apparently we’re not the only ones asking. Scholars and writers have been trying to figure this out for years. But to be honest, they’ve filled in the blanks with more fiction than fact. You know how it goes, when you don’t have information about someone or something, you make up your own stories and fill in the blanks

trying to figure out the situation and make sense out of something, even if “sense” is not what is meant to be made. Sometimes, we are given a mystery to learn from the question itself, rather than to seek its answer, especially if finding an answer requires us to fabricate one. Let me explain.

Some say the best way to define James, son of Alphaeus is by who he is NOT. He is not James, son of Zebedee – of the famed Zebedee brothers, the “sons of thunder” – James and John, the ones who wanted to sit on Jesus’ left and right side in heaven. In fact, probably the only reason we know that our James today is the “son of Alphaeus,” is simply because the writers of the gospels and Acts needed a way to distinguish him from the *other* James, son of Zebedee when they were listing out the Twelve.

And just so you know a touch of the controversy and speculation

about our James today, way back when, people thought James, son of Alphaeus might be the same person as James the Less (or Lesser or Younger) – who is also only mentioned four times in the gospels. James the Less could be a reference to the fact that this James was younger (in age), or of lesser stature (physically) or status (socially) than other James' in the Bible but who knows (couldn't have one of these guys been named Jim?!). The real kicker is that James the Less is always mentioned in relation to his mother, Mary, more specifically Mary of Clopas (John 19:25) and James, son of Alphaeus is mentioned in relation to his father. Both James' have next to nothing known about them – beyond each of them being identified by one parent (but not the same parent)...so it's a stretch to make this link.

Even more, James the Less is never really defined as an apostle OR disciple, but James, the son of Alphaeus is...so there is a problem there. (Btw: if you're curious, go back and

listen to the beginning of my sermon on July 16th for a distinction between disciple and apostle.)¹

A second rabbit hole you can dive down is exploring whether James, son of Alphaeus is also James the Just, or James the brother of Jesus (who is also, by the way – the author of the book of James in the Bible.) A couple times in scripture we learn that Jesus had brothers, one is in Galatians 1:9, when Paul writes that he knew James, the Lord's brother. Paul calls this James an apostle (so they jump to the conclusion that he must be talking about James son of Alphaeus), but again, we know from the sermon a few weeks ago that Paul defined apostles differently than the gospel writers, so just because he calls James the brother an apostle, doesn't mean this James was one of the original twelve.

And think about it: 1) If James son of Alphaeus was Jesus' brother, how do we piece together how James son of Alphaeus (not Joseph!) has a

¹ From July 16, 2023 sermon: The word disciple (in the Greek) means "student" or "learner." Every person who follows the teachings of Jesus is called his disciple. Apostles, on the other hand, are "messengers" (that's the Greek meaning), literally "ones who are sent." An Apostle is anyone sent on a mission in the name of Christ and who is given the authority of the one who sent them...meaning they met and knew Jesus and he "sent

them out." So again – Disciples were simply any of Jesus' followers who devoted themselves to learning from him. Apostles were people who had met and followed Jesus during his life **AND** were called and commissioned by him to spread the gospel. Every apostle was a disciple, but not every disciple was an apostle.

different father than Jesus? Did Mary get remarried to a guy named Alphaeus? We have no reason to think this, especially because as Jesus is dying on the cross he asks his beloved disciple, John to care for his mother for his mother to care for John. I doubt that would happen if Alphaeus (a new husband) was in Mary's life.

And if James the Less is supposed to be James son of Alphaeus and is ALSO James the Just (Jesus' brother) nothing adds up. How could some of these James' have their mom be Mary of Clopas (What about Mary the mother of Jesus – a different Mary?)²

Confused? Yeah, me too. How early Christian writers made sense of all these James' being the "same James" is a stretch – but I think it's because they wanted to make a meaningful connection and have one of Jesus' brothers be his disciple. But Because we know Jesus taught about how hard it is to leave one's family (father, mother, brothers) in scripture to take up their cross and follow him (Luke 14:25-34³), that also gives us reason to believe that

Jesus' brother James was NOT one of the twelve he called. Besides, if he was...wouldn't that have been the very first call story we heard? You know like, *"Jesus and his little brother James (who was always tagging along with him everywhere he went) were walking along the shoreline when they saw Simon and Andrew fishing..."*

The final myth to bust is about James son of Alphaeus being the brother of Levi, who is also identified as the son of Alphaeus in Mark 2:14. Levi is another name for Matthew – the tax collecting disciple. But this distinction breaks down. "In every list of the disciples, James son of Alphaeus and Matthew are never grouped together like the other brothers. James is always listed as "son of Alphaeus," but Matthew never is. And if that weren't enough: the lists of disciples explicitly call Simon Peter and Andrew brothers, and James and John brothers, but they make no mention of any association between Matthew and James son of Alphaeus. And unfortunately, no one named Alphaeus is ever mentioned again, so there's no way to tell if

² Ryan Nelson, "Who Was James Son of Alphaeus? The Beginner's Guide" *OverviewBible.com* (11 Sept. 2019), accessed on August 6, 2023 at <https://overviewbible.com/james-son-of-alphaeus/>

³ "Whoever comes to me and does not leave father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."

these are two different Alphaeuses.”⁴

Plus, if Matthew and James were brothers, and James son of Alphaeus was also James, the brother of Jesus, then would that make Matthew the brother of Jesus, too? And there is definitely no evidence of this.

Who knew that figuring out who Jesus’ followers were required such detective work! Confusing, right? Mysterious, too.

Honestly, as I thought about it, it reminded me a lot of discipleship today. Would you call yourself one of Jesus’ followers? One of Jesus’ disciples? I hope so! If so – do people know who you are? What are your distinguishing characteristics as a follower of Jesus, besides an identifier like “I’m a member of Calvary Baptist Church of Denver” or “My parents were Mr. and Mrs. Foundational Church Members.” So often – our own lives of faith are defined by where we go to church or who raised us or the faith tradition from which we came – but what about how WE are living our lives today? How do people know us as Jesus’ disciples by

our actions and our ways of living in the world *Today*?

Yesterday at Aurora PRIDE, some folks were stopping by our booth kinda confused – wondering how we could be Baptist and have women ministers and accept LGBTQ+ folks. It’s like you could see the wheels turning in the brains, going “huh?” Their own detective “spidy senses” were up...trying to figure out who we were and what we were all about. And that’s because of what they’ve “heard” about OTHER Baptists in the media or perhaps even because of their own faith experience in a Baptist church as a child. And some thought they knew who we were by name or association – some even assuming we were definitely connected to the Calvary Chapel movement that began in California led by the late Chuck Smith.

So you see names and identifiers tell us something, but they can also misleading and easily misinterpreted. So we’re not going to do this to poor James, son of Alphaeus. He’s had enough speculation created over his identity! Instead of guess (rightly or wrongly) but

⁴ Nelson, *ibid*.

the specifics of his life, instead we're going to look at who he was as part of a collective, part of the *group of Twelve*.

Because clearly – being part of the Twelve – being part of a group of people close to Jesus is a huge part of what the disciples have to teach us today. As a collective unit, why do the *disciples* (plural) matter? Why do we need to hang together and gather together and be in a group? Why do we need to form churches and small groups and organize together? Why not just live and believe on our own? Why not just follow Jesus as a loner? Well, for one, we really don't have examples in scripture of people following Jesus as a loner. It's clear that friendship, discipleship in a group, matters. Even for Jesus himself.

Jesus called this group of Twelve together for very specific reasons. And there are at least four reasons we can glean from our texts today, and from the group that James, Son of Alphaeus, devoted his life to. So as we meet James, son of Alphaeus today in our texts, we meet the other Twelve too – and see why they were called together, what they learned together, and how they stayed together.

I do know, by the way, that it is repetitive to read these lists of twelve disciples over and over again – but I hope you see today that we have a reason for doing so, because each context in which the Twelve names are listed is unique...and each illuminates a different reason for why we follow Jesus as a collective, as a group – and not in isolation.

#1) People need shepherds. They need direction and leadership. (*Matthew 9:35-38, 10:1-4*)

#2) Shepherds, or Leaders, need support. We cannot do this alone. (*Luke 6:6-16*)

#3) The needs of people are immense: worldwide and never-ending; so the work is never done, which means we need a sustainable and life-giving system – something we help choose and create (*Mark 3:7-10, 13-19*)

#4) Once we've been shepherded, and once we become shepherds ourselves, and once we identify a group to support us, we must keep spiritually growing together. (*Acts 1:13-14*)

And these four points are a cycle that describe what it means to come to faith, find faith and develop it, share faith, and sustain it. We are all – at one and the same time – both sheep and shepherds, followers and leaders, disciples and disciple-ers.

So let's break these four areas down a bit, text by text.

#1) People need direction and leadership. People have a literal and physical need for “shepherds.”

In Matthew 9:35-38, we learn that Jesus has been really busy in his ministry so far – going to all kinds of cities and villages teaching in synagogues, proclaiming the good news, curing illnesses. Matthew says that as Jesus saw the crowds he had compassion for them, they were like sheep without a shepherd. I think Jesus knew he was their Shepherd...but with THIS many sheep in need...he knew he couldn't be the only one. The world needed lots of shepherds. It's significant that Jesus says to those who have been following him in this moment: the harvest is plentiful (meaning: there are lots of people who need help and who need to hear the good news and

who are ready and ripe to receive it) but the laborers are few (meaning: I can't do this on my own people, I need you to step up and help!), *“therefore”* Jesus says, *“we're gonna ask God to send out laborers into the harvest.”*

And it's right after THIS moment – of identifying the depth and breadth of the people's needs, that Jesus summons Twelve disciples from all who are following him and not only names them, but in THIS moment, gives them *“authority over unclean spirits to cast them out, and gives them the ability to cure every disease and illness,”* (Matthew 10:1).

Jesus literally needs help in doing his day to day ministry. More shepherds are needed for all of these sheep. Jesus can't get this all done on his own. And even if Jesus could physically meet at all the needs of the people, he needs emotional and spiritual support. It's not just about needing “more hands on deck”; it's about need a listening ear too.

#2) Shepherds, or Leaders, need support. Jesus himself needed support; he recognized he needed spiritual and emotional support for his

teaching / preaching / healing ministry.

In Luke's gospel we get a whole different context for when the Twelve were chosen by Jesus. Jesus had just been in the synagogue teaching on the Sabbath. It was not 'lawful' to heal on the Sabbath (because that was considered work). But Jesus, of course, put people above policies. A man with a withered hand was there and Jesus healed him right in front of the Pharisees and Scribes who were watching him to "catch him in the act" so to speak. To see Jesus do something that they could call "wrong" so that they could "bring accusations against him." We read in Luke 6, verse 11 that after this healing the Scribes and Pharisees were "filled with fury" and began discussing and plotting what to do about Jesus.

Jesus must have felt this weight. And he must have been worried. There is no way he didn't feel their wrath or their threats or their doubting of his mission and calling. In fact, Luke says as much in verse 8 when he says "Jesus *knew* what they were thinking..." He did not shy away from their fury, but it must have taken a toll. He is human, after all.

So immediately after this healing on the Sabbath, when he felt deeply just how much was at stake in his ministry and how these people in power really were out to get him, Jesus went to a mountain to pray. He spent the night in prayer, the text says. And what came of that prayer? *The decision to call out Twelve people from his current followers – to choose Twelve guys who could be the ones who surround him and are present with him and help him.* To have a support group, if you will, for his journey.

In this context we see that Jesus, even as Savior and Messiah, needed emotional and spiritual support in his ministry. And not just in terms of getting away to a mountain to pray and spend time with God. Yes he needs that AND he also needs community. Shepherds, even THE Shepherd of all shepherds, need support. Leaders cannot lead alone. As we follow Jesus in faith, we need people around us – supporting us when we are down, encouraging us when things are dangerous, reminding us of our convictions and values when a lot is riding on the line. I'm reminded of just how many people the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. surrounded himself with – Ralph

Abernathy, Bayard Rustin, Benjamin Mays, Andrew Young, Hosea Williams, Jesse Jackson, Harry Belafonte, and Mahalia Jackson – to name a few. If you are doing the work of the Lord rest assured it's going to be hard. We all need people who we can lean on.

So perhaps the greatest lesson here is that when times are really hard in our life – when it feels like nothing is going our way – when we can't catch a break and it feels like we're trying to just do the right thing and get through life but we sense continual danger or illness or struggle or despair or loneliness...perhaps that is when we realize, once again, in our journey, that we need people around us. We cannot do life alone. We are not created to. We are created in community (Genesis) and we are called in community (gospels).

So in Matthew, we learn that the world has a need for leaders and shepherds. And in Luke, we learn that shepherds and leaders have a need for support. That leads us to Mark, and our third point.

#3) The needs of people are immense: worldwide and never-ending; and so because

the work is never done, we need a sustainable and life-giving system...AND we get to have a say in what is best for us!

Similar to Matthew's gospel, in Mark, Jesus has a multitude of people following him – we learn that folks are literally flocking to him from all over the world (or what they would have known as 'the world' back then) – a bunch of different cities and regions. Jesus literally tells his disciples (at this point just a group of folks who were following him closely) – get me a boat so that these people do not CRUSH ME! This is a visceral and vivid image. People were pressing their bodies upon Jesus for healing. Think about what it's like as you stream out of a concert or stadium, all of the people all around you. Now imagine all of them reaching for you and touching you, gravitating to you and literally crushing you because of their need and desire for healing or hope or transformation from you?!

Again – after this realization of the crushing need of the world (not just of some people, but *all* people) – Jesus goes to a mountain to pray, and then he says – you know, I'm going to

call who I WANT to be around me and he appointed Twelve to share in ministry with him. Note that he not only chose and called who HE wanted, they also responded. The disciples had a choice to say YES or NO, and the text says, “they came to him.” Jesus chose them, and they came.

So in Mark, there is a realization that not only do people have needs (as we learned in Matthew) – but this need is worldwide, and it is immense...never ending. It’s not limited to a few people, or a certain time or place. Needs will keep coming and going, even as other needs are met. So ministry is never complete. It’s like Jesus has a lightbulb moment as he is crushed in from all sides – this is not a “one and done” thing, or a “check list” that can be complete. The ministry is on-going. And I not only need followers who will help, I need a life-giving, sustaining system. So Jesus prayed and thought about WHO he wanted and he chose the Twelve.

There is a really important lesson in here for us. While we are called to minister to and with all people, without discrimination...it is okay, and good, to surround ourselves

with a core group of people who we chose – who we know are like-purposed – who “get us” and our “needs” – who know our strengths and our weaknesses and make us better versions of ourselves. Maybe Jesus chooses people he likes and respects, or perhaps who he knows will compliment his gifts – or maybe he chooses people who he believes are teachable and moldable...we don’t really know the criteria – but he has some kind of criteria – even if it’s just listening for the direction of God.

What are your criteria for those you pull around you for support so that when you are getting crushed, you don’t feel as crushed because they help you bear the load? Who are “your people”? Who are the few who you can rely on just as Jesus chose the Twelve? And is there a reciprocal relationship with them? Remember, the Twelve had *a choice* to respond, Mark says. This wasn’t a one way relationship. Those, as we all know, never last. Of course, the disciples are not perfect – they betray, deny, and fall asleep. But, on the whole, they are *with* Jesus. They are *present*.

Which brings us to our fourth

and final point for today, which we get from the book of Acts.

#4) Once we've been shepherded, and once we become shepherds ourselves, and once we identify a group to support us, we must keep spiritually growing together.

In Acts, we read that the Twelve are in the upper room in Jerusalem. This is just after Jesus has ascended up to heaven, and left them to begin their ministries without him. I imagine it's a very disorienting moment. They lived through his crucifixion, but then he appeared to them after the Resurrection. He was back in their lives. But *this* time, his departing seems to be "for real."

And what we learn in this very disorienting moment, a moment of great transition and change in their lives, a moment that is liminal in time and space – they know that What Has Been is no longer but they have yet to discover What Will Be (you know these times in your life)...and what do they do? They pray. And they don't just pray, the text says they were constantly devoting themselves to pray. That's a fancy way of saying – these guys were gathering together to talk to God

and one another...a lot! Because you see when you pray in a group, you aren't just speaking to God, you are speaking to one another. You are sharing vulnerabilities and desires and wishes and hopes and concerns to God that are deliberately and openly overheard by others. It's quite a powerful thing to experience the prayers of a group. To hear people pray for you, to hear people pray for others in the world, and to be courageous enough to let other people hear your prayers too.

It's very bonding, and it's spiritually enriching. Prayer is just *one* spiritual practice that helps us grow. Studying scripture together is another. Serving together. Worshiping together. Breaking bread together. "*Wherever two or three are gathered IN MY NAME...*" Jesus said, "*there I am also.*" (Matthew 18:20)

This is a deep and lasting lesson for us as a community of faith. That our growth together – especially in liminal times, especially in times of discernment when the way forward is still yet unknown, especially in times when we may feel anxious or uncertain – the best thing we can do – is gather together and pray

together...to be together in relationship with one another and God. To engage in repeated spiritual practices together. TO keep showing up. To lean in.

When we feel like there is anxiety or uncertain in a system, honestly – it's often easier just to pull away or pull back. To withdraw and think, “you know, I’m just going to let leadership figure this out,” and “once it’s figured out” I’ll decide if I’m on board or not. I just want to sit on the sidelines. But the thing is, there’s too much at stake to be on the sidelines in faith.

But if any of us sit on the sidelines, the game doesn’t get played in full, because we don’t have our full team on the field. We need each other – especially when the road ahead feels a bit foggy and unknown. Especially when we have concerns or questions. We need each other – if for no other reason than to remind us, again and again, to turn and return to God with all that is on our hearts and minds.

Times of transition and change up the ante, so to speak, and at these times, more than any other, we need to be gathering together in the expressed presence of God – to be reminded of WHO we are and

WHOSE we are. Because it is so very easy to forget. We can think we’re just a church building, or a non-profit organization, or a place that has programs or missions...we can forget that we are in fact, a church – the *ecclesia* – or the called together assembly – of the people of God.

It's so very easy to forget our call and our purpose as disciples. Sometimes it’s hard to remember we are all on the same team working for the same goal, especially as our journeys diverge or our lives are at all different places. Some are distracted while others are focused. Some are on top of their game, while others are just learning. But we can’t forget that we’re all out there together.

I’m sure being part of the Twelve was not always easy for James, son of Alphaeus, or for any of the disciples for that matter. Being part of a group does NOT always make things easier. And sometimes the group itself will flounder – just look at the Women’s Soccer Team in the U.S. World Cup. Despite what people are calling an unprecedented poor performance, they are still out there on the field – playing together, persevering, persisting,

trying to accomplish the near-impossible feat of completing a three-peat at this Women's World Cup – something no nation has ever done (win the World Cup three times consecutively) in the men's or women's game.

They have a goal in mind, and they are going for it – even with games where they floundered on the field, and even with wins that some people say should have gone to others, and even with lots of criticism, internal and external. They still keep playing.⁵ And to some extent, this is all Jesus asks us to do – is to stick together and keep playing. To not throw in the towel. *And* to realize, as Brazilian soccer legend Marta Vieira da Silva does that the world is watching...and we, just by playing in the game, just by stepping on the field, can make a difference and effect change.

This past week Marta gave an emotional press conference ahead of her team's match with Jamaica. Through her own tears she said, *"We are aware of everything we have been building in our careers. But I don't know. I don't normally*

focus too much on myself, on Marta. I try to focus on the whole picture, on everyone, on the collective and we've been doing together and evolving. Do you know what's cool? When I started playing, I didn't have an idol, a female idol. You guys didn't even show any female games on television. How was I supposed to see other players? How was I supposed to understand that I could arrive at a national team and become a reference for others? Today when we go out on the street, people stop. The parents stop and say, 'Oh my daughter loves you, she wants just to be just like you.' And it's not just me, Marta, it's other athletes as well... This wouldn't have happened if we had stopped in the first obstacles that we faced. Of course I am very happy to see all of this now because 20 years ago, 2003, nobody knew Marta – at my first world cup. Now 20 years later we have become their reference for many women in the world. Not only in football [but in] journalism as well. We see many women journalists here today and we didn't see that before. So when we enter the open doors for equality, [more doors keep

⁵ Sermon preached just hours before the US Women's Soccer team would go on to lose their chance at the three-peat later that Sunday afternoon on August 6, 2023.

*opening]... But we are all very proud and we ask a lot for our generation to continue to do that to inspire more girls, and more boys...It's a continuous persistency and it didn't start with me, but [with] a lot of the women back then [whose names we don't know]."*⁶

Well, we do know *your name*, James son of Alphaeus. And, you like the other Twelve, have paved the way for us. Your ministry as one of the Twelve had a life-long effect on all of us, despite how little we know about you personally. We watched your game and we have been inspired. You give us a great example to follow – even with all your faults and frailties. It's your collective, persistent faith and prayers that inspire.

Thanks be to God we have this community called, Calvary. May being known as disciples, allow us to become Discipler-s – for one another and the world. For the need is great...for other people, but for us too...for you...and for me. We can't do this without each other. We weren't created or called to do it alone. So let's not. As my predecessor, the Rev. Dr. Brian

Henderson always says, "*There is more we can do together than any one of us can do on our own.*"

That pep talk works for me.
How about you?

Amen.

⁶ Brazilian legend Marta gave us an emotional press conference ahead of her side's match with Jamaica (August 2, 2023), viewed on August 6, 2023 at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tB3Lq36H8w>