

**Disciple Series #9: James, Son of Alphaeus: The Unsung Disciple<sup>1</sup>**  
**Mark 15:37-41a; 16:1 and 1 Corinthians 12:18-25 (NRSV)**  
**By John Gill**

Today is the Feast Day of St. Francis of Assisi, the monk in the Middle Ages who is best known for going around the countryside preaching to the animals – and encouraging we humans to acknowledge and celebrate God’s love for all the creatures God created. At our 9 a.m. worship this morning, we had a wonderful service of “blessing the animals” where folks brought their pets to receive God’s blessing. It was fun!

You know, growing up, my family never had many pets, only the occasional goldfish, turtle, or hamster. As an adult, I adopted a cat, and then I met Terri who also had a cat! Later, as a family, we have had a menagerie of critters, including fish, rabbits, a parakeet, and several cats - but never a dog. Today, our family, now grown and living in homes of their own, have a total of eight cats. And yes, we now have a grand-dog, a beautiful golden retriever, named Winnie (short for Winnie the Pooh).

But as our children were growing up, we never had a dog, although the kids wanted one. Mom and dad vetoed that idea because - we knew who would end up taking care of the dog!

Before I met Terri, the only dog anyone in my family ever had was a little pic-a-poo named “Tuffy” that belonged to my sister, Esther, after she was living on her own. He was the runt of the litter. No one expected him to live, but he surprised them all! That’s how he got his name. Tuffy was a lot of fun to have around. When we would come for a visit, I liked to take him out for walks around the neighborhood every day, and HE enjoyed the outings, as well. Whenever I would pick up his leash, Tuffy would bark and jump up and down. He couldn’t wait for his walk!

But if you have ever had a dog, you know that sometimes, you – and your pet – have very different ideas about where to go on your walk! Even though, every day we walked the same route around the neighborhood, Tuffy was ALWAYS wanting to lead me off in another direction. No matter where I wanted to go, HE wanted to go someplace else. I guess He just wasn’t cut-out to be a “follower,” – he wanted to be a “leader.”

There are also some people like that. Some of us are just not good at “following.” We can lead but we can’t follow. It may be that some of us have not learned that it often takes more skill, more self-confidence, and more internal security to be a follower than it does to be a leader. And the disciple, James, son of Alphaeus, was certainly one of those “followers” of Jesus.

It’s interesting that the bible is almost completely silent when it comes to this disciple of Jesus. Neither a word nor a deed appears in the New Testament regarding him. The closest thing we have to a reference to him is the mention of the fact that his mother was one of the women at the crucifixion, and also went along on Easter morning to anoint the body of Jesus and found the tomb empty. But about her son, we know very little, indeed.

There are some biblical scholars who believe that this “James” MAY also have been the brother of the disciple, Matthew, also known as Levi, (who, according to Mark 2:14 is also described as being the son of a man named “Alphaeus”). But nowhere in Scripture are James and Matthew described as being brothers.

Some translations of the bible call him “James, the Younger,” which might have been a way to distinguish him from the other two Jameses in the New Testament: James, son of Zebedee (a.k.a James, the Greater) who we looked at in last Sunday’s message; and James, the Brother of Jesus, who wasn’t one of the 12 Disciples at all.

The Greek word used in regard to our James for today is “mikros” (from which we get the word prefix “micro-“ – an indication that James MAY have been small-of-stature, as well as young of age). But, by any measurement, it is clear that this James was the least notable of the three Jameses.

Since he neither speaks nor acts in the New Testament, we might consider him as a representative of the vast anonymous multitude of people who, throughout their day-to-day lives contribute to the cause of the Kingdom, and pass on from this life to the next without ANY praise or recognition for their faithfulness.

Yes, James could well be considered the “patron saint” of all the “unsung heroes” of the faith – those faithful disciples who have gone through life unrecognized, yet who have contributed so much to the Kingdom of God.

I think the lesson we can learn from James, son of Alphaeus is that Christ calls both shepherds and sheep. While the church needs shepherd-leaders, the church also needs people who are NOT leaders, but are sheep, faithfully following.

We have to have chairpersons of committees, trustees, Sunday school teachers, choir directors, worship leaders and pastors – and all kinds of leaders in the church; but we ALSO need many more followers. James was a faithful follower, and we ought to be faithful followers, too.

What does it mean to be a “follower” in the church? Why are followers so essential to the cause of Christ?

First of all, followers are ENABLERS.

James was probably low-key and introspective. However, he enabled Peter, James, and John to be leaders. He enabled Jesus’ ministry to continue and prosper. You see, very little is achieved in the church without “enablers.” Enablers are team-players, content to act in the background as part of an ensemble cast.

“Ensemble” is a word we often associate with the theatrical world. It refers to a drama without stars or prima-donas – a cast that is viewed as a whole. The program for such a production usually reads simply, “The Company,” and lists all the players in alphabetical order, regardless of the prominence of their roles.

Years ago, a well-known actor achieved great success on television. He was receiving a lucrative salary, his financial future was assured, and his name had almost become a household word. Then suddenly, at what most of us would view as the peak of his career – he quit. He was quoted as saying, “I want to go to England to play with an ensemble company so that I can learn how to be an actor. I’ve become a star, but I’m not an actor yet.” You see, that man seems to have realized the value of being a team player – an enabler.

There are many “ensemble” players or “enablers” in every church. We have them here at Sebastian Methodist. They are not seen and few people know about them. They never stand up and lead worship on Sunday mornings, or speak at Administrative Council, or take leadership in any way – but they are of great significance to our church! They are enablers, working behind the scenes to help our church carry out our mission, which is: *“living out the Truth of the Gospel through Spirit-filled worship and study, faithful fellowship and service, and impacting our world as followers of Christ sharing the Gospel.”*

James the Lesser was an “ensemble-player.” He was an enabler, and that is what God calls many of us to be, as well.

But “followers” are more than “enablers.” They are also “ACHIEVERS” – people who accomplish the goals others may have set. Leaders may project the vision and identify the goals for the church, but those who are the followers are the ones who ultimately do the work.

Followers get a great sense of purpose and accomplishment by finding a job that needs doing, and getting that job done! When you become part of something that is bigger than you are – a cause that is greater than yourself – there is a thrill, there is a joy, there is a sense of accomplishment and meaning in your life.

One day, Robert Henri, the artist, was attending a showing at an art gallery in New York City. He stood before a magnificent oil painting by the artist, John Singer Sargent, admiring it. As he studied it, he became aware of a gruff-looking man standing next to him who kept murmuring to himself, “I’ve been given a place at last!” Intrigued, Robert Henri asked, “Are you in this sort of work?” “I have been for years,” the man replied, “but this is the first time I got on the line.” Confused, Henri asked, “Which is your picture?” “That one,” the man answered, gesturing toward the painting right in front of them. Perplexed even further, Henri said, “You must be mistaken – that was painted by Sargent.” “Yes, I think it was Sargent who painted the picture, but it was ME who made the frame!”

The frame, as you know, can make a remarkable difference in the painting. The one who made the frame should have a sense of accomplishment; he or she deserves a feeling of self-fulfillment, just as much as the painter himself.

And every person who enables God’s Kingdom to advance, who enables the Good News to be spread, should have a deep sense of accomplishment and satisfaction, as well.

So, the church could not function without leaders – but neither would it prosper without the countless multitude of unsung disciples like James, who are content to take a backseat to those who take the lead: but whose contribution is invaluable to the Kingdom of God.

If you’ve ever be to Washington, D.C., you probably visited The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. On it, are inscribed the words: “Here rests, in honored glory, an American soldier known but to God.” That could be said of many Christians: “here is the unknown Christian, known but to God.” James, son of Alphaeus, is the “patron saint” of all “unsung disciples” of Jesus. He is an “unknown soldier” of the cross – an unrecognized servant of Christ.

In the apocryphal book o Sirach (44) - (one of the writings that is found in the Catholic Bible – Books the Catholic Church recognizes as scripture, but do not appear in our Protestant Bibles) - there is a beautiful passage that salutes all the unsung disciples who were faithful throughout their lives:

*“Let us now praise famous men, (... I’m sure, today we would say “men and woman...”) and our fathers in their generations. The Lord apportioned to the great glory, his majesty from the beginning. There were those who ruled in their kingdoms, and were men renowned for their power,... all these were honored in their generations, and were the glory of their times. There are some of them who have left a name, so that men declare their praise. And there are some who have no memorial, who have perished as though they had not lived; they have become as though they had not been born... But these were men of mercy, whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten; their prosperity will remain with their descendants, and their inheritance to their children’s children... Their posterity will continue for ever, and their glory will not be blotted out... Peoples will declare their wisdom, and the congregation proclaims their praise.”*

James was one such “saint” of the church. We may not know what He said or did, but we can be sure that his life made a difference for Christ.

So, whatever happened to James? It seems that James, son of Alphaeus, was as anonymous in death as he was in life. That’s because church tradition has often confused the various Jameses and how they died. Some suggest that this James was sawn in two; other sources say he was stoned to death in Jerusalem. But whichever story is true, it is clear that James, son of Alphaeus, is worthy of his place among the Saints of the Church. He is the “patron saint” of all unsung Christians everywhere. He may even be the patron saint of most of us!

Prayer:

Lord, we thank you for the witness of James, the son of Alpheus, whose life reminds us that, even if the world forgets our efforts for the Kingdom, you will never forget! Lord, whether we have been called to be a leader in the church or a follower who laborers quietly behind the scenes, we thank you that we can do our part for the cause of Christ. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> (Note: Significant material for this sermon was taken from a sermon by Walter Underwood, “Not a Word or a Deed: James,” published in The Contemporary Twelve. Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN, U.S.A., 1984)