
Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ

Old Camel Knees

A Sermon by

Rev. Dr. Nancy Nelson Elsenheimer

Scripture: James 1:17-27

August 30, 2009

My mother, Dorothy, Dottie to her friends, was an only child. Her mother, Catherine, died when Dottie was about 30 months old. Her father, Gaylord, raised Dottie as best he could by himself. He never remarried. He was a railroad man with the Long Island railroad and he found ways to make sure that his Dottie was cared for. As my mom, Dottie took extra care to be there for her family. As I look back, I see all the ways she put herself last for the sake of her children. She longed for family and in-between her growing up years and having her own family, she found ‘family’ in her early twenties when she became a part of a sorority.

Dottie was in business school, and the “sorority girls” formed a new kind of family. I grew up seeing the pictures of smiling young women, big hats, 8 to 12 of them. They were Aunt Marge and Aunt Betty and Aunt Shirley. Some of them were really my aunts: Betty married my father’s brother Bob; Marge, my father’s sister, married Ken.

Aunt Shirley, a sorority sister, married my Uncle Vinnie (yes, that kind of Uncle Vinnie), Sicilian Catholic married to an Irish Catholic. I don’t think I knew, until I was a teenager, Aunt Shirley and Uncle Vinnie were really not my ‘real’ aunt and uncle. They even had a daughter named Nancy, a few months older than I was, and when the family was together, as we often were on weekends and holidays, she was Nancy Barbara and I was Nancy Jane. In my college years, as Nancy Barbara moved out of the house to get married, I moved into her old bedroom and lived with Aunt Shirley and Uncle Vinnie while I did my student teaching assignment nearby.

Francoise Rossier writes of his time when he, a European, was living in Abidjan, the major city of the Ivory Coast, West Africa. Once sparsely populated, the city absorbed huge waves of immigrants from all over the former French colonies of West Africa. The only language all these people had in common was French, so French became the native language of Abidjan. In most of the native languages of West Africa, Rossier noted, no distinction is made between a ‘brother’ and a ‘cousin’, whereas such a distinction exists in French. When the people of Abidjan want to specify that ‘brother’ means a true blood sibling, they need to add the phrase ‘same father, same mother’.¹

All this ‘family’ talk to remind us of the lenses through which we read the Epistle of James.

(Do you know what an Epistle is? An Epistle is the wife of an Apostle. Sorry, bad joke.)

The Epistle of James is probably not a book of the Bible that you read a lot. The epistle has been the subject of controversy. Some have said that it was a purely Jewish writing that was created into a Christian work by an editor who merely added at the beginning a greeting “To the twelve tribes of the Dispersion” and “of the Lord Jesus Christ”. Another reason that you probably do not read the Epistle of James a lot is that the Protestant Reformer Martin Luther despised the doctrine of James. Martin Luther was a “sole fide”, by faith alone, a justified kind of guy. ‘All humanity is fallen and sinful. We are incapable of saving ourselves from God’s wrath and curse. But God, through Jesus,

¹ <http://campus.udayton.edu/mary/Rossier.html>

granted us a pardon, a justification, which we receive solely through faith. Faith is passive. When we receive Christ, we receive all the benefits.²

The Epistle of James, however, says ‘no’ to this “Lutheran” doctrine. Faith is not passive. “Be not hearers only of the Word, but doers.” Faith is active. Faith is being generous. Faith is caring for the widows and the orphans. Faith is more than sitting and looking in the mirror and admiring yourself and all that you have done, all that you have accomplished, all that you have saved up in your 401(k) or your Nina Mason Pulliam gift.

Faith is recognizing that you are a part of a larger family than your blood. In Christ, we are a new kind of family: a kind of family none of our words for ‘family’ can really describe.

This whole issue of family was fascinating to me as I read more about who ‘James’ is supposed to be. I learned this week that you cannot really go to www.ancestry.com and type in ‘Jesus’ and get a clear family tree. The family tree has any number of men named James in it, and any number of women named Mary in it. There is debate on all sides about Jesus’ family. Did he have brothers and sisters? Were they by the same mother and/or father?

It gets into the whole “Mary as perpetual virgin” discourse, that Mary was always a virgin before giving to birth to Jesus and that she remained a virgin after having Jesus. By 383 AD, the Helvidian interpretation maintained that the ‘brothers and sisters’ are Jesus’ true siblings and children of Mary and Joseph.

Jerome opposed this shortly thereafter by saying that the brothers and sisters are Jesus’ cousins. Another 4th century Bishop named Epiphanius said that the ‘brothers and sisters’ of Jesus are children of Joseph’s previous marriage,³ raised by Mary and Joseph, a ‘blended family’, if you will.

Can you imagine what it was like growing up in the house with Jesus, a brother, a half-brother, a cousin? Anne Rice, in her fictional novel *Christ the Lord: Flight from Egypt*, describes James as a cousin to Jesus, who witnessed Jesus raising people from the dead from the time he was a child. The Gospel of John says that Jesus’ brothers didn’t give him the respect due to him. By the first chapter of Acts though, James has joined the company of believers after the resurrection, finally coming to believe that Jesus was the Messiah. By Acts, chapter fifteen, James has become an important leader in the church in Jerusalem, extending the Gospel beyond the Jewish people to the Gentiles. The early Christian historian Eusebius writes of the legend of James: so devoted was he to the work of the church, so devoted in prayer, James was nicknamed ‘Old Camel Knees’. “James was often in the habit of entering the temple alone and was often found on bent knees interceding for the people, so much so that his knees became as hard as a camel’s knees in consequence of his habitual kneeling before God.”⁴

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sola_fide

³ <http://campus.udayton.edu/mary/Rossier.html>

⁴ <http://www.lhcf.org/sermons/2006/JAMES5NOVEMBER506.htm>

'Be doers of the word, not hearers only' includes our prayer life. What would it look like if we spent more time praying for one another, lifting one another up in prayer, surrounding one another with love and healing light, rather than talking about one another, with suspicion or fear: what would that be like?

Be doers of the word, not hearers only, means listening to one another, deep listening. "Why are you so afraid of health care reform?" "What makes you so afraid of people who are different from you?" "What scares you most about love?"

Jesus didn't say, "Pick the easiest people and treat them nicely, just as you'd like to be treated."⁵ The early church was rife with disputes and conflicts. To survive as followers of the Messiah was a life and death challenge. The complete transformation of human nature was proving impossible, even for Old Camel Knees, who became a Saint because he tried to eradicate human suffering.

St. James, Old Camel Knees, called people to become more and more Christ-like, to have more and more of the mind of God and less and less the mind of me, myself and I. Be doers of the word, not hearers only means prayer, deep listening, and becoming more Christ-like.

Listening to the funeral mass of Senator Ted Kennedy transported me back to my family, the family of Aunt Shirley and Uncle Vinnie and the comfort they felt in the tradition and ritual of the Catholic mass. Ave Maria. The automatic, deeply ingrained call and response, Lord, hear our prayer. And yes, Yo Yo Ma can play at my funeral too.

Who could not have been touched, whether you liked Teddy Kennedy or not, with the stories of how although he was a person of privilege and family suffering, he used both of those to help others. In his public service life, he gave voice to those who were not heard. In his private and family life, he overcame maybe more pain and tragedy than many of us will ever know. Telling his son who lost his leg to cancer at age 12, Ted said, "There is nothing you can't do. We're going to climb this hill together, even if it takes us all day. Even our most profound losses are survivable."⁶

So, if Old Camel Knees James was family to Jesus, brother, half-brother, cousin, whatever, he too survived the losses and turned those losses into new life, into a hope for the future, into the everydayness of every relationship. You see, James could have just stayed in the temple in Jerusalem and prayed all day, all night, every day. He had the knees for it. But James took the holiness, the sacredness, the specialness of that temple into the streets, into his relationships with people, into the call for justice. James showed us and tells us 'when we live our faith in the love we share, in the service we give and in the justice we promote, we never leave the holy place, because we personify it. Let us become the church that we invite others to attend.'⁷

⁵ Deepak Chopra, *The Third Jesus*, p. 2.

⁶ http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20090829/ap_on_re_us/us_kennedy_funeral

⁷ Ken Samuel, weekly devotions *Stillspeaking Daily Devotional* for August 27: "Can I Live Here?"