

Commencement Address

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Evan Thomas in his compelling biography tells us the story of an important and complex American – Robert F. Kennedy. Attorney General of the United States, U.S. Senator from New York, son to a multi-millionaire and brother and confidant to the President of the United States, John F. Kennedy. Raised obviously in an environment and family of great privilege and power – Evan Thomas unfolds for us how the young Bobby Kennedy lived life brashly and confidently and some could even say arrogantly all the way until a very certain point. And that point was the day of his brother’s death. While the nation grieved from a distance the death of their President – young Bobby exponentially grieved the death of his brother. He had lost his hero, his friend, his deepest family connection and his place even in the halls of government. It was a cataclysmic event that left the 38 year old boy adrift. The public and violent death of his President Brother sent Bobby into a dark night of the soul. He was at a loss without this man he loved and respected. He wasn’t sure what he was to do. Who was he now to be? Long days and weeks of brooding finally led him to consult the wisdom of the ages and in particular the great poets and playwrights of ancient Greece. A devout Roman Catholic – Bobby sought the aid of the great writers of tragedies to go deeper into the mystery of life and death. Aeschylus was his favorite and from the great poet he learned that wisdom comes mostly through suffering. Through tragedy comes calling. He memorized a passage from Aeschylus that helped him cope with the tragedy of his brother’s death – and that he quoted aloud upon the death of his fellow reformer Martin Luther King. Quoted Bobby:

God, whose law it is that he who learns must suffer. And even in our sleep pain that cannot forget, falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our own despite, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God.

Evan Thomas goes on to say in repeated ways – that through the death of his brother, Robert Kennedy became not only a different man, but arguably a better man. Through suffering comes wisdom. Through tragedy comes calling. By the awful grace of God.

While there are many James's in the New Testament to pick from, most scholars believe that the Letter of James was written by James, the brother of Jesus. James the Just he was called. Now you would think that being the brother of Jesus would warrant you a fairly decent biography in the New Testament. We know a decent amount about Peter and Paul, Mary and Martha, John the Baptist and John the apostle – but when it comes to James the Just we don't know much at all. In fact, when it comes to the time prior to the death and resurrection of Jesus – we know virtually nothing. Our best guess is that he was not an original disciple of Jesus – if anything he and his siblings joined forces with their mother to pull Jesus back from his rabbinical itinerancy – worried that he might get himself in trouble with some of his radical teaching. There is no sign in the New Testament that James followed in his brother's earthly mission. You can imagine perhaps even some brotherly tension. Some disagreement on how older brother is conducting his life – leading the family business – letting people believe that he was the Messiah. Come on, older brother, don't you think you're letting some of this get to your head?

But then comes his brother's public and violent death – crucifixion outside Jerusalem – an event at which James, as far as we can tell, was not present. Three years talk of Messiah and heavenly kingdom, and Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace – all strapped to the cross and left to die. Tragedy unrivaled by even the greatest of the Greek poets. What is a brother to do? Where is he to go now?

So the apostle Paul tells us in I Corinthians that when Jesus died and on the third day rose – there came a time eventually that he appeared to James. That’s all he says – he appeared to James. He appeared to his brother. We don’t know the details. James never speaks a word about it. All we know is that James upon the appearance of his brother becomes seemingly a different person. In those wild and crazy days of the early post-resurrection Church – when no one quite really understood what was happening – James the brother of Jesus – once a distant bystander -- became the leader of the Jerusalem church. Distant bystander – to leader of the Jerusalem Church. And not just any leader of any church. For to be the leader of the first century Jerusalem church was to be, in many respects, the leader of the underground. It was to be the leader of this small community of people who had come to believe the Jesus was Messiah – and while the great centerpiece of Jerusalem was the great Herodian Temple pictured on the cover of your bulletin – this massive temple that embodied the ancient belief of Israel’s Yahweh – it was the little Jerusalem Church scattered from house to house that believed that the true temple had been found in the person of Jesus. Messiah Jesus. Jesus Christos. Jesus the Christ. They had no building to go to. Their public witness to Christ would not be represented on some church sign. It was all a matter of how they lived. How they conducted themselves. How they embodied the love and grace of the Messiah. And whether or not such a belief would ever take hold had a lot to do with how the Jerusalem Church went about its life – lived out the kingdom of heaven. This was the leadership brother James had been called to upon the appearance of the resurrected Jesus. The resurrection can be pretty affecting. Something took place in this man James after the death of his brother.

Through tragedy comes calling. And so to the bystander James comes the appearance of the risen Christ and out of tragedy comes calling. Out of suffering comes wisdom and now James is thrust into leadership of the early church and becomes the leader of the underground community in the shadows of the temple – encouraging daily the living of the good and gracious and righteous life of the kingdom of heaven. James, you see, was the church’s first pastor. Leader of the first

community of Christ. But not just any pastor, not just any leader. His was the call to lead a church constantly under the threat of persecution and suspicion. A community whose members – just by what they believed were eliminated from just about any position of society. It was James' job – to shepherd this ragtag flock – to encourage these early believers – to courageously lead the underground movement of the body of Christ. The apostle Paul called these Jerusalem folks the saints. The saints in Jerusalem – he called them that, because he knew that no other church faced a greater threat in the face of their witness than the saints of Jerusalem – the saints led by a man they called James. James the Just.

I've been a pastor for almost thirty years. I've moderated at least 300 session meetings. Led over a thousand staff meetings. All of that is a cakewalk when you think about pastoring the first century Jerusalem church. Theirs were a different set of questions --- how do we survive? How do we love each other, feed each other, protect each other – while the world around us hates us? How do we take care of the widows and orphans? How do we keep pettiness from creeping in? How do we stay focused on the grace and mercy? James the Just received the calling to shepherd the flock, pastor the congregation, lead the people in the face of all sorts of powers and influences that would seek to tear it apart. No surprise then that Josephus the great Roman historian records for us that in the year 61 – thirty some years after that appearance of his risen brother, thirty years after the Holy Spirit blew upon that Pentecost community, thirty years of daily leading the underground community of Christ in the shadows of the temple – in the year 61 Josephus tells us that James the Just, brother of Jesus, leader of the Jerusalem Church was arrested by the chief priests of the temple and condemned to death on false charges. Martyr in his witness to the appearance of the risen Christ.

So it stands to reason why the early church fathers made sure to bring forward in the canon of scripture the teaching of the great shepherd – the first pastor – James the Just. Let us, they said, make sure to include for the generations to come the wise teaching of the One to whom we gave the impossible task – of leading the mother church. Oh yes, Martin Luther was not fond of the Letter

of James – he thought it a straw gospel that spoke too much about works and not enough about grace. But it could be that he was missing the point. The words of James are words of a man who had been chiseled by life. He had borne the death of his brother and he witnessed the appearance of his brother. He was a changed man whose life was a calling to serve as did once his brother. Wisdom had come from suffering. Calling from tragedy. What better gift could be given the Church than the compiled counsel of this wise and chiseled and martyred leader? Do you want to know – scripture asks us - what’s most important about this new life in Christ? Do you want to know what it looks like to really be church in a culture that could care less about the church?

There are no more timely words of wisdom than what we hear from Brother James. Timely words of wisdom. It’s that time of the year, isn’t it? Commencement time. Commencement speech time. Thousands upon thousands of graduates don their caps and gowns and are seated along with their family and sit before some dignified person whose job it is to dispense some pearls of wisdom that will set them on the course for living life the right way. What’s the most important thing for us to know? We, in effect, say to these people who stand at the podium. Give us your best wisdom chiseled by the years?

And so I suppose it’s what we get when we begin to read the Letter of James – The church invites Brother James to speak - one whose wisdom has been forged out of persecution. One whose calling was formed out of the appearance of Christ. One who led the underground movement of the saints of Jerusalem. So let us, in conclusion, hear the wisdom born of suffering - the words of James the Just, the first chapter:

My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.

If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven

and tossed by the wind; for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord.

Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up, and the rich in being brought low, because the rich will disappear like a flower in the field. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the field; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. It is the same with the rich; in the midst of a busy life, they will wither away.

Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. No one, when tempted, should say, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one. But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death. Do not be deceived, my beloved.

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.