

Sermon for Zion – August 30, 2020

Hymns: 96 – Let Us With A Gladsome Mind; 421 - Rejoice in the Lord Always;
685 - How Firm a Foundation (1,2,5)

Scripture: Jude (Selected Verses)

Sermon: Called, Loved, Kept

Jude (vss 1,2; 24,25)

*Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James,
To those who have been called, who are loved in God the Father and kept for
Jesus Christ: Mercy, peace and love be yours in abundance.*

*To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his
glorious presence without fault and with great joy - to the only God our Saviour be
glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages,
now and forevermore! Amen.*

When I was a little kid – and I know this will come to you as a shock – I would always be picked last for the team. Any team. Baseball, Soccer, Red Rover, Kick the Can – last. Well, to be accurate, sometimes I wouldn't be absolute last, just part of the gaggle of assorted unwanted who were namelessly relegated to the bench – “You take those two, and I suppose we'll take those other leftovers.” That was me; one of the other leftovers.

In that respect, I know how the Book of Jude must feel. Many people would even have trouble finding it in their Bibles, stranded as it is between the almost-as-obscure 3 John and the intimidating and mostly impenetrable Book of the Revelation. I described Jude in last week's sermon as “the odd little letter of Jude, which is kind of angry and strange,” and a thorough reading of it would confirm that impression, I'm sure. But you know, it isn't entirely Jude's fault. Because the letter we have isn't the letter he wanted to write. He says so himself. But before we get into that, let's find out who Jude is, anyway.

And it may surprise you to learn that most believe him to be the brother of Jesus. Not as famous or influential as Jesus' brother James, but a brother nonetheless.

If that surprises you, don't feel bad. First of all, we rarely talk about Jesus' brothers, other than James, and secondly, although “Jude the Obscure” is the name of a Thomas Hardy novel, Jude the Obscure wouldn't be a bad name for our Jude either.

He doesn't pop up in the New Testament very often. In fact, do a New Testament search on the name Jude, and you'll come up with a single hit – this very letter.

Digging a little deeper, we find that “Jude” is a short form of the name Judah, after which one of the tribes of Israel was named. But a New Testament search won't come up with any people named either Judah either.

No, there's another form of the name, more familiar to you: “Judas.” Now, that name we know. And in many ways, we wish we didn't. But if you take Judas Iscariot out of the list, you're still left with a few. There's another disciple named Judas, but he's called “Son of James,” so that's not him. There's a Judas called Barsabbas, and that's not him either. There are a couple more, just to keep us on our toes. And then there's the Judas who wrote our letter, the Judas we call Jude, in much the same way you might know a Thomas, and call him Tom. Our Jude, we hear about in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark. It happens when Jesus is preaching in Nazareth. Matthew records the reaction of the crowd:

Coming to his hometown, Jesus began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. “Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?” they asked. “Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren't all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?” (Matthew 13:54-56)

So, Matthew and Mark tell us, Jesus has four brothers, and at least two sisters. One of the brothers, James, probably the eldest of the four, eventually becomes head of the church in Jerusalem, and we know a fair bit about him as a result. We have his letter in our New Testament. As for the others - Joseph, Judas and Simon - we don't really know much of anything, other than this little letter of Jude. If Joseph and Simon ever wrote anything, it didn't survive the passage of years. And as for the sisters, it sorrows me to say we know nothing at all. Not even their names, which I think is a great pity, because I think they would have much to tell us, if cultural prohibitions and the passage of the centuries hadn't silenced their voices. As to whether these brothers and sisters are the product of Joseph and Mary, or whether Mary only ever had Jesus, and the others are step-siblings of Jesus, we'll let other churches argue.

We do know that while Jesus' brothers were not always supportive of him, his Resurrection convinces them, and the Book of Acts, in the very first chapter, lists them as followers, joining with the faith community – and with their mother Mary – in prayer. Then, in the middle of the Book of Acts, probably 20 years or so after the Resurrection, James comes to the forefront as leader of the gathered church – and almost as quickly drops from view. The only remaining clue we have about Jesus' brothers is in an off-hand reference from Paul, when he's complaining about those who are complaining about Paul's expenses in ministry. Paul writes (1 Cor 9:5):

This is my defense to those who sit in judgment on me. Don't we have the right to food and drink? Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Peter? Or is it only I and Barnabas who lack the right to not work for a living?

Did you get that? “*Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Peter?*” So by this time – end of the 40s AD – the Apostles are travelling from community to community, congregation to congregation, supported by the believers, and the Apostles are bringing along with them their wives. As are, writes Paul, “*the Lord's brothers.*” So we know that at least two of Jesus' brothers are working as teachers, preachers, missionaries or some other such role in the church. One of those brothers was undoubtedly James. And another was our man Jude. Jude, who wrote the letter we have before us. The letter he didn't want to write. He tells us so. JB Philips translates it beautifully (Jude 3,4):

I fully intended, dear friends, to write to you about our common salvation, but I feel compelled to make my letter to you an earnest appeal to put up a real fight for the faith which has been once and for all committed to those who belong to Christ. For there are men who have surreptitiously entered the Church but who have for a long time been heading straight for the condemnation I shall plainly give them.

And then Jude goes on at some length, condemning those who are bending the words of Jesus and the teaching of the Apostles to their own ends, ends which seem, as ever, to do with pride, sexual licence, and financial gain, “*scoffers,*” Jude writes, quoting Peter, “*who follow their own ungodly desires.*”

Unfortunately, Jude's defense of the faith gets a bit tricky and weird, as he uses as the background of his argument the Book of Enoch, which you won't find in your Bibles, no matter how hard you look. Because it isn't there. The Book of Enoch is old, written several hundred years before the birth of Jesus, and apparently well known in Jesus' day, but it was never regarded as Scripture. When you read all of Jude, and the middle bit sounds strange, that's why. The Book of Enoch is pretty strange too.

So I'd like to show respect to Jude by setting that middle part aside for the moment, which was the part he never wanted to write in any case. I'd like to focus on the letter he did want to write, but never got around to, and I believe we can know just what he would have said anyway, by the way he both begins and ends his letter, with words that are quite beautiful, not at all odd or strange, and which are helpful to us today. And since I've been going on at some length, and you may have forgotten them, let me read them to you again:

*Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James,
To those who have been called, who are loved in God the Father and
kept for Jesus Christ: Mercy, peace and love be yours in abundance.
To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before
his glorious presence without fault and with great joy - to the only God our
Saviour be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord,
before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.*

*"To those who have been called, who are loved in God the Father and kept for
Jesus Christ."* Called, Loved, Kept. That's the letter Jude wanted to write. *"Mercy,
peace and love be yours in abundance."* That's what he wanted to talk about. And so, on Jude's behalf, will I.

"To those who have been called." Called. Or, in other translations, chosen. Remember the story with which I started this sermon? About never being picked for the team? Well, guess what. God's got a team. And he's picked you. Here's how Jesus put it (John 15:16): *"It is not that you have chosen me; but it is I who have chosen you. I have appointed you to go and bear fruit."* Which is to say, I have a job needs doing, and I have chosen you to do it. I pick you.

Now, I know why I wasn't picked for those sports teams. I was younger and smaller than the other kids, and a bit of a bookworm even then, and they knew and I

knew that I was going to be more of a liability than an asset. But God picked you, because God made you, and gifted you with particular abilities and talents and connections, and knew you had what it takes to get the job done, in ways that someone else just couldn't do.

Paul talks quite a bit about how God has called us, chosen us, and about those particular abilities and talents with which we have been blessed. He does so in lots of places, but 1 Corinthians 12 is an entire chapter devoted to the idea. Paul says:

There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but they all come from the same Spirit. There are different ways to serve the same Lord, and we can each do different things. Yet the same God works in all of us and helps us in everything we do. The Spirit has given each of us a special way of serving others... But it is the Spirit who does all this and decides which gifts to give to each of us.

Now, every sports team requires people who are good at different things. A football team made up solely of quarterbacks would be terrible at defense. A hockey team of only goalies might be tough to score on, but likely wouldn't rack up many goals. A church, if it is to do the work God has for it to do, needs people with a wide variety of gifts and talents to get the job done. And, Paul says, the Holy Spirit has this figured out, and has distributed gifts and talents accordingly. And some of those gifts and talents have been given to you. And so you're on the team. You've been picked. Equipped. Chosen. And if you are sitting there thinking, "God hasn't given me a gift or a talent," it's only because you haven't opened it up, given it a whirl, tried it out. It's there. God says so.

You've been called. Chosen. By God. Who loves you. Remember that bit I read earlier, where Jesus says "*You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you?*" Right before he said that, he said this (John 15:9): "*As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.*" Ever wonder how much you are loved? Or whether you are loved at all? Well, how much do you think God loved Jesus? That's how much Jesus loves you. "Yes, Jesus loves me," says the song, "The Bible tells me so." Yes, it does. And yes, He does. And that's why he's chosen you. He loves you.

I'll never forget the day my friend Peter was captain of a team. Peter and I had been buddies since the very first day of Grade One. Unlike me, he was a remarkable athlete even as a child. So the gym teacher picked him as captain of one of the Bordenball teams (is Bordenball even a sport anymore?). And guess who Peter

picked first? Me. When was that? Grade Three? Four? And I remember it to this day. I don't remember who won, or who lost. But I remember being picked. And that feeling of being loved. Of having that kind of friend. And what did Jesus say right before he said he picked us? That he loves us. And he also said (John 15:14), "*You are my friends.*" "What a friend we have in Jesus," says another old song. Yes, we do. Because we are chosen. And we are loved.

We are chosen. We are loved. And we are kept. Ever been thrown off a team? I was. By the coach. A baseball league had started up, and all the kids were encouraged to join. So I borrowed my sister's glove, and showed up. I was maybe 6 years old. Didn't have a clue about baseball. I have vague memories of standing at bat and inevitably getting hit by a pitch and ending up on first base, and staying on first base even when the next kid got a hit, but I just stood there, not sure what to do, and everyone on my team was yelling at me, and somehow we were both out, and I wandered back to the bench and the coach told me to go home. My mother asked what happened. "I got kicked off the team." Why, she asked. "I have no idea," I said, and went and read a book. They can't kick you out of a book.

And Jude tells us, we are "*kept for Jesus Christ.*" In other translations, "*kept safe in Jesus Christ,*" or "*kept in the faith by Jesus Christ,*" or, my favourite way of expressing this, found in the New Living Translation, "*called by God the Father, who loves you and keeps you safe in the care of Jesus Christ.*" That's you. That's me. Kept. Kept safe. Kept in the care of Jesus.

Maybe there have been days you've wondered whether God has lost patience with you. Whether or not God still loves you. Whether you are worth it to God. Whether you are worthwhile at all. Well, let me tell you something. You're on the team. You're not getting kicked off. You have been "*called by God the Father, who loves you and keeps you safe in the care of Jesus Christ.*" You are called. You are loved. You are kept. No matter what life brings – no matter what disappointments you endure – no matter the disappointment you feel you have been – you are "*called by God the Father, who loves you and keeps you safe in the care of Jesus Christ.*"

And so, writes Jude, in the letter he really wanted to write, "*Mercy, peace and love be yours in abundance... To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy - to the only God our Saviour be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, now and forevermore! Amen.*"