

**Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
The Reverend Dr Scott Everett Couper
Sunday, August 15, 2021
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost**

“Patron Saints of Lost Causes and Sawyers”

**Third of six sermons of a series entitled:
“Apostolic Martyrs: Sacrifices Made for the Early Church”**

Christian Scriptures: John 14:15-24 and Acts of the Apostles 1:12-14



[This sermon series on the apostles is intended to prepare us for the months to come. We will learn about the apostles and the great sacrifices they made in order to inaugurate the Christian church in the midst of a hostile world. I would like all of you to see yourselves as apostles of Centre Church, strengthening her as she begins again on September 12th.]



One of the most fascinating and unexpected things I learned while preparing for this sermon series is that there really is not much clarity on who the twelve disciples were in the scriptures. I find this unclarity amazing. You would think that the identities of Jesus' most trusted friends, and ultimately the founders of the church, would be certainly be known. Yet, they often are not. Half-way through the sermon series, I have now discerned two main reasons for this uncertainty. One, as we have already learned, many of the disciples had the same names.

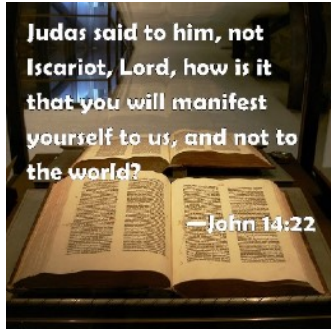


Remember our first sermon introduced us to 'James the Greater' and 'the Lesser'.¹

These duplicate names were to the writers and are to us as readers very confusing. Often, one does not know who is who. Second, many apostles have

¹ And in also there is a 'James son of Alphaeus' (Luke 6:16 and Acts 1:13) who is likely one of the two Jameses, most likely 'James the Less' also known as 'James the Just'. But, 'James the Less' was Jesus' brother. So, Joseph would have been the father not Alphaeus. And the other. See what I mean? The possibilities are numerous. So, are there *three* Jameses? There is also Judas Iscariot, Judas son of James, and Judas Thaddeus (AKA 'Jude'). Are there three Judases and three Jameses? Oye vey!

multiple names.² In our second sermon, we heard of Simon who was also named Peter.



The first scripture reading Lynn read from the gospel of John records that one of Jesus' disciples named Judas [not Judas Iscariot who betrayed Jesus] asked Jesus why he would reveal himself through the Holy Spirit to only a select group of people and not to everyone (John 14:22). The funny thing about this 'second' Judas is that he is not mentioned as a disciple in the gospels according to Matthew (10:3) and Mark (3:18).



Instead of a second Judas, there is in Mark and Matthew a 'Thaddeus'. So, since the beginning of the church, 'Thaddeus' is thought to be this 'second Judas'. It was

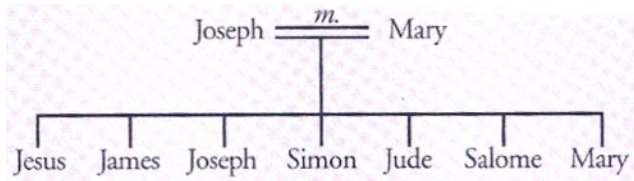
² Simon/Peter; Thaddeus/Jude/Judas; Joseph/Barnabas; Judas son of James (Luke 6:16)/Judas brother of James (Acts 1:13)

not uncommon for a Jew with a Jewish name (Judas or Jude) to also have a Greek name like 'Thaddeus' or to change one's Jewish name to a Greek one, like 'Saul' (Jewish) who changed his name to 'Paul' (Greek).³ The other reasonable justification to change the name 'Judas' is to disassociate him from 'Judas Iscariot' (as the text itself does). To make things even more confusing, those named 'Judas' were often referred to as 'Jude', as they both translations of the name in Greek. So, for one person we have 'Jude', 'Judas', and 'Thaddeus'. Last but not least, there are different translations of 'Jude of James' to be the 'son of a James' (NIV, RSV, and NRSV) and a 'brother to a James' (KJ). If one chooses the later, then Jude is possibly the author of the book entitled 'Jude' and Jesus' and James the Lesser's brother! Protestants don't think Jude is the bother of Jesus, Catholics do.



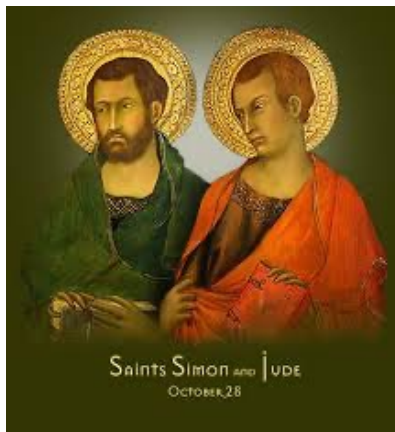
Simon the Zealot was another of Jesus' twelve disciples. Simon the Zealot is simply not to be confused with Simon Peter.

³ "Paul (given name)", [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_\(given_name\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_(given_name)), accessed August 14, 2021.



Yet, again, we have to wonder if Simon the Zealot is, again, with ‘James the Lesser’ and ‘Judas (not Iscariot)’, one of Jesus’ brothers. One of the many permutations of who the disciples were therefore possibly renders three of the twelve disciples as Jesus’ brothers. Incredible. No? I never would have thought one quarter of the disciples were Jesus’ brothers. Is that nepotism?

Let us leave names and hear this morning’s lesson from Thaddeus and Simon the Zealot.



This series is in-part entitled “Apostolic Martyrs” so to some extent it is incumbent upon me to discuss the apostles’ deaths. I specifically chose Thaddeus and Simon the Zealot as a pair because church tradition teaches that they were killed

together.⁴ After prolific missionary careers, one of many differing accounts record that both apostles were martyred together in Beirut in about 65 AD.



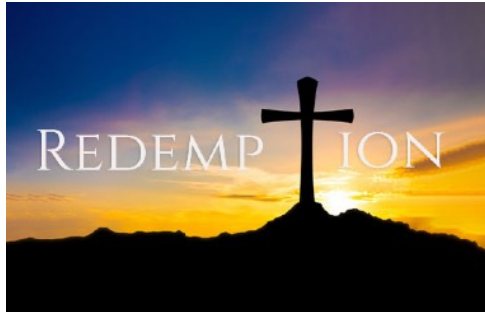
Thaddeus was apparently killed with an axe and Simon the Zealot was sawed in half. Hence, Simon is the patron saint of sawyers, those who cut wood for timber. I found it particularly amusing that Thaddeus is not the patron saint of lumberjacks, but rather of lost causes! Apparently, Christians have been particularly reluctant to call upon Thaddeus for assistance because his name is ‘Judas’ and *no one* wants to call on *any* ‘Judas’ for help (even if it is not Judas Iscariot).

**Do You Need
Urgent
Financial Help?
Say This
Prayer to Saint
Jude Thaddeus
Now**

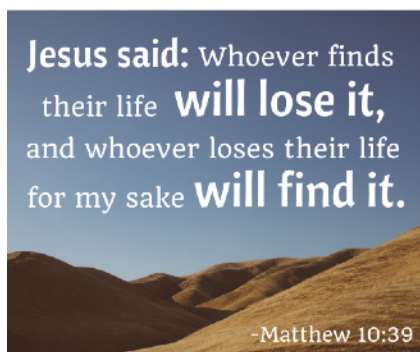


⁴ Don Belt, “The Apostles” in “Jesus and the Apostles: Christianity’s Early Rise”, *National Geographic*, Washington, D.C., 2021, 99.

Only those who are absolutely desperate call upon Thaddeus for help. Due to the resultant lack of demand for his services, Thaddeus is eager to take up any cause – even hopeless ones!



So, Thaddeus got axed and Simon was sawed in half. As I said in a previous sermon, I am hesitant to glorify or romanticize violence, torture, and death. I also question and doubt that suffering and death, **in and of themselves**, are redemptive, that is, that they heal or save oneself or others. Therefore, I am hesitant to speak on the apostles' suffering and deaths. Yet, the Christian narrative begs me to reconsider.



Jesus preached "Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 10:39). That indicates to me that at least for

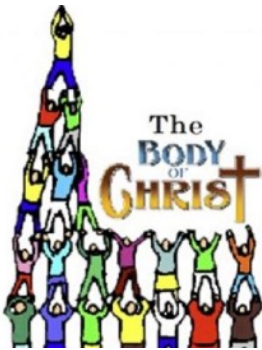
oneself, death can be redemptive. Jesus also preached, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13). So, there is something biblical about suffering and death being redemptive for others.



Now, I am not going to advocate to me or to you this morning that the best thing we can do as Christians is to leave this church and search for causes and means by which to be killed. No. That is not today’s lesson. In fact, this morning, I am not advocating to you that we must personally suffer, for the sake of others. Maybe we should, but that is not my message this morning nor will it likely be my message during the stewardship campaign in October and November. No. Instead, I would like to depersonalize this issue and discern *for our church*, with the Long-Range Planning Team that meets this afternoon, ‘what is our church’s purpose, mission, and vision?’



Please follow my train of thought: Jesus suffered and died on the cross as an example for us to, perhaps *not* be killed as he was, but to at least behave selflessly in our daily lives. Ten of the twelve apostles suffered martyrdom in particularly gruesome manners, *not* to necessarily encourage us to be tortured and sawed in half, but as an example inspiring us to leave a legacy of faith for generations that will follow us.



Our faith teaches us that the church is the Body of Christ – and the Christ in Jesus forfeited his body on the cross. Now, I am not suggesting that we somehow forfeit our church. I am not advocating that we abandon, sell, burn, or otherwise bankrupt our church, as that would serve no greater good. Yet, as members of the Long-Range Planning Team and of Centre Congregational Church, perhaps we need to ask ourselves, “Is there any aspect or manifestation of our church, the Body of Christ, that can suffer and die for the greater good?” I know this is a strange question. Normally, when we think about our church’s mission, we ask, what can the church build? How can the church strengthen? How can the church

grow? But, perhaps we can ask ourselves how can the church suffer for a greater good? What can the church forfeit for the greater good? What aspect of the church, the Body of Christ, can die for the greater good?

Friends, these are counter-intuitive questions.



When we think about our own lives, we always think, 'how can we be healthier'; 'how can we preserve our finances'; 'how we live longer'. Yet these were **not** the questions, these were **not** the missions, of the apostles. Likewise, these were **not** the questions nor missions of Jesus.



Likewise, as the church, we tend to think, 'how can we have more members?'; 'how can we preserve our endowment?'; 'how can our church exist forever into

perpetuity?’ Yet, perhaps Jesus’ example, perhaps the apostles’ examples, are begging us to ask another question.



When it comes to our mission, perhaps the church should ask, ‘how can the church, the Body of Christ, suffer for a greater good’? Perhaps if we ask that question, then and there we will discover our mission. And if we follow our mission, our vision of the establishment of the kingdom of God on Earth, just as it is in heaven, will come to fruition.

This was the Word of God. And it was delivered to the People of God. And the People of God responded, “Amen!”