

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
The Reverend Dr Scott Everett Couper
Sunday, August 22, 2021
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

“Nathanael: The ‘First’ Doubting Thomas”

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

Christian Scriptures: John 1:43-51



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N-Opab_B6YI

The beautiful three-minute animated video clip we just watched was sent to me by the chair of Compassionate Brattleboro, Jim Levinson.¹

¹ The video can be found at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N-Opab_B6YI, accessed August 26, 2021.

**The real kindness is when
you are ready to give up
something that you need
yourself.**

The lesson was as simple as it was profound: “The real kindness is when you are ready to give up something that you need yourself”.² The young woman in the video gave up her seat for an older man when no one else did. Those who were initially insensitive only felt any remorse for ignoring the elderly man when they discovered that the woman herself used crutches and likely had a disability or injury.



This sermon series we are learning 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 relaunches herself as a hybrid church on September 12th.

² The quotation is often attributed to Ankita Verma, Rups, ViniV, Parmjeet Singh Gurjjar, Mahmud Akaba, Debosmita Roy, Monali, Sumit Kashyap, Manveen Tuli, and Anand Mishra.



In our last Pub Theology session, there was much talk about our church endowment, much talk about how *inaccessible* most of our building is to anyone with a serious disability, and thus how unwelcoming our church is to those who cannot climb stairs to our third floor or descend down stairs to our Memorial Hall.³ Last week, we recalled how the Church is the Body of Christ. We questioned how our church might ‘suffer’ for the greater good just as Jesus the Christ and the apostles did. As our church and the Long-Range Planning Team continue to plan for the future with Paul Nickerson, my prayer is that we will respond compassionately to our community and world like the woman with crutches who forfeited her seat for an older man who was more vulnerable than her.

The apostle who we learn about today, like those we learned about in weeks past, was ready to give-up something that he needed: his very life!

³ CENTRE/D PUB THEOLOGY FELLOWSHIP Time: 7:00 PM Eastern Time (US and Canada); weekly on Tuesdays

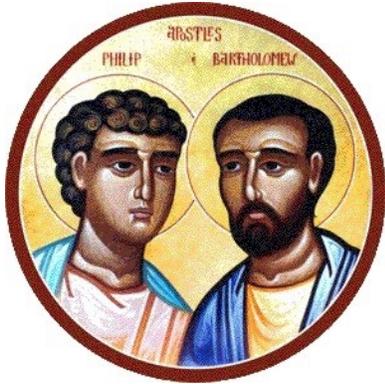
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Meeting ID: 813 1137 2680 Passcode: 702226 Phone-in: 1.929.205.6099, when prompted enter Meeting ID# and Password#

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In the three synoptic gospels (Matthew 10:3, Mark 3:18, and Luke 6:14/Acts 1:13), the authors list Bartholomew as one of the twelve disciples.



As were many of the disciples, Jesus likely paired Bartholomew with another disciple: Philip. In our reading today, Philip introduced Bartholomew to Jesus *of Nazareth*. Upon hearing from Philip that Jesus was the one foretold by the prophets, Bartholomew blurted out loud, “Nazareth, can anything good come from there?!” Hence, I entitled this sermon “Nathanael: The ‘First’ Doubting Thomas” because here we have a disciple who, *before* the resurrection, doubted that Jesus was who people claimed he was. And that, my friends, is how I get three disciples in one sermon! Philip, Bartholomew, and Thomas. Hey! Twelve or thirteen disciples in six weeks, I have to double and triple-up sometimes!

But, wait a minute. Did anyone catch that? Did anyone pick-up a goof? A contradiction? Did anyone notice something odd? Thus far, I have been preaching about the disciple ‘Bartholomew’. Yet, the title of my sermon references

‘Nathanael’. In the immortal words of a Saturday Night Live skit, “What’s Up with That?”



Well, here we go again! This week we have another case of a disciple with multiple names, depending on the gospel read. As I mentioned, Matthew, Mark, and Luke/Acts all have a ‘Bartholomew’ listed as a disciple. Yet, the gospel of John lists no ‘Bartholomew’ (John 21:1-2). Instead, John includes a ‘Nathanael’ in Bartholomew’s place. So, church tradition has always understandably assumed, using much additional evidence (with which I will not bore you), that Bartholomew is Nathanael.⁴ Therefore, the disciple’s full name is ‘Bartholomew Nathanael’ just as my name is ‘Scott Couper’.



⁴ Michael Wilkins, “Bartholomew”, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Volume 1, A-C (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 615.

If this this assumption is *incorrect*, then we might assume a scenario whereby the disciples were numbered twelve for only symbolic reasons when there were actually quite a few more. Since beginning this series, I have felt that the numerous names for one disciple and the resultant numerous permutations for who is who, renders it very likely that there were far more than twelve disciples. Twelve is a sacred number symbolizing the twelve tribes of Israel, and thus “perfection, entirety, and cosmic order”.⁵ Therefore, it is very feasible that even if Jesus chose seventeen disciples, they would have called ‘The Twelve Disciples’.



This series is about sacrifice. Our video clip is about sacrifice. This series and the video clip encourage sacrifice of something that is needed or valued for a greater good. Not to get ahead of ourselves, but what can be more valuable than one’s time, one’s talents, and one’s treasure (that is, one’s finances)? And what can be more valued than one’s life?

⁵ Darlene Zagata, “What Is the Biblical Meaning of the Number 12 in the Bible”, *Classroom*, September 29, 2017. Found at: “<https://classroom.synonym.com/what-is-the-meaning-of-the-number-12-in-the-bible-12085081.html>”, accessed August 22, 2021.



Church tradition teaches that Bartholomew was martyred, or executed. And as can be seen the image on your screen and bulletin cover, he was killed in a most gruesome manner. Church tradition tells us that as retaliation for converting the King of Armenia to Christianity, Bartholomew was flayed alive.⁶ His skin was removed and he was beheaded. Thus, and this is morbidly ironic, Bartholomew is the patron saint of tanners!⁷

Friends, you know me well enough by now that I have no interest in you or me being flayed alive and beheaded.



In fact, the ironic aspect about this entire sermon series is that it is focused upon the martyrdom of the apostles and I am most uncomfortable with any torture,

⁶ Don Belt, "The Apostles", in "Jesus and the Apostles: Christianity Early Rise", *National Geographic* (Washington, D.C.), 91.

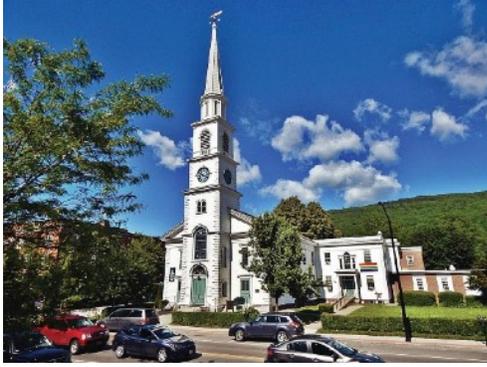
⁷ Michael Coogan, "Bartholomew" in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. Metzger Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 75.

violence, and death (Christian or otherwise). I am very very very hesitant to declare anything good coming from them. But, I do pray that you begin to appreciate that which I do. While I do not idealize nor romanticize pain and death (in fact, I abhor them), I cannot help but really conclude that the Christian church survived and thrived while being persecuted because the apostles *inspired* those who witnessed their fealty and sacrifice.



As a historian, not as a theologian, I can state that I believe the church converted it's enemy, the Roman Empire, because of the sacrifice of the apostles about whom we are learning these six weeks. I do not advocate you or I be tortured and martyred. In our time and context, not much good would come of that. Yet, I pray you do feel, and I mean 'feel', not 'think', that you and I are here together in fellowship as members of the church because of Bartholomew Nathanael.

Despite all the historical conjecture, four gospels attest to Bartholomew Nathanael's existence as a follower of Jesus. There is no doubt that he left family and his vocation to journey around the then known world in order to spread the gospel of Jesus the Christ. We are here because of him.



So, Deacons, Member Care, Mission & Service, Buildings & Grounds, Council, Fundraising, Christian Education, Long-Range Planning Team, Finance, and Endowment Committees, what is our church able to do to enable other generations removed from us to point to and say, “It was *their* witness that facilitated our continued presence”. Bartholomew Nathanael sacrificed. So, we also are to sacrifice for the common good, for the good of our Christian progeny. That is our lesson today.

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