

**Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
The Reverend Dr Scott Everett Couper
Sunday, August 29, 2021
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost in Ordinary Time**

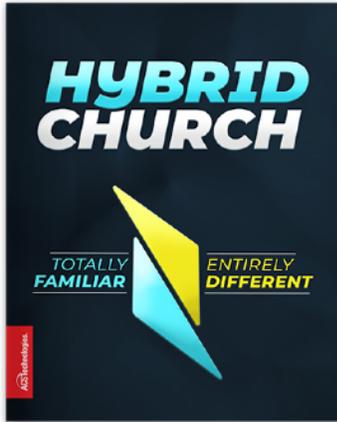
“Writers Sent”

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

Christian Scriptures: Matthew 9:9-13 and John 19:23-27



Friends in Guilford, Dummerston, West Dover, and West Brattleboro, we are so pleased you are joining Centre Church in the midst of our devotional survey of Jesus’ disciples who became apostles of the church.



At Centre, we are anticipating the six-week long re-launching of our church as a hybrid church on September 12, following which we will have a Stewardship Campaign that will take us all the way to Advent in November and December. We are discerning as members and as a church how we can give of ourselves, as did the disciples, for the greater good.

Though we are nearing the conclusion of our journey, you are present with us on a Sunday when the theme is as relevant to your churches as it is to ours. Today's message pertains to all our churches because we are all in the same 'ecclesiastic boat'.



The continued decline of mainline Christianity in the county and state, society's increasing secularization, and the ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic have left clergy and lay people few in number - and those remaining are terribly 'sea-sick'. All of our churches have in common the recent inability to worship in our sanctuaries, the pain of social distancing, and the now emergent hope for a gathered reunion. I pray the lesson today from two apostles, Matthew and John, will inspire us.



One of the things we have learned in this sermon series is that most of the disciples had multiple names. Multiple names make it difficult for scholars to determine exactly how many disciples there were (for there very well might have been more than twelve) and who was who.



Matthew is a perfect example. In our scripture reading, the author named a tax collector 'Matthew' (9:9). However, the same passage as recorded by Mark (2:14)

and Luke (5:27) name him 'Levi, the son of Alphaeus'.¹ Levi the tax collector sat at the customs house by which Jesus walked. As he passed, Jesus directed Levi to "Follow me".



Matthew must have been enamored with Jesus, for he invited Jesus to his home for dinner. Upon observing this, the scribes and the Pharisees accused Jesus (a supposed rabbi) of eating with tax collectors and sinners. Well, 'what's wrong with tax collectors?' At the time, Jews despised tax collectors as collaborators and traitors who assisted an invading imperial force plunder their own people. Thus, Matthew's own people deeply resented him.



¹ "Matthew the Apostle", *Wikipedia*, found at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matthew_the_Apostle, accessed August 29, 2021.

In this series, we have also learned that according to church tradition all but two of the disciples, Judas Iscariot and John, were executed, that is, martyred.² One account of the scriptures recalls Judas committed suicide by hanging (Matthew 27:1-10) while Luke has him simply falling forward whereby his entire abdomen emptied its contents (Acts 1:18).³ No matter which – no one killed Judas for his faith. John is the other disciple thought *not* to have died at the hands of those who persecuted the Christian apostles.⁴ “The most plausible theory of John’s death states that John was arrested in Ephesus and faced martyrdom when his enemies threw him in a huge basin of boiling oil. However, according to the tradition, John was miraculously delivered from death. The authorities then sentenced John to slave labor in the mines of an island called ‘Patmos’.

² Of course, church ‘tradition’ is notoriously dodgy from a historical perspective as there are often many different ‘traditional’ accounts of the apostles’ deaths. What is important to note is the theological and ecclesiastical importance of the traditions and not necessarily whether they are historically accurate. Traditions inspire. Therefore, for good or for bad, religious history inspires, as does theology, rather than necessarily account for what strictly scientifically or chronologically occurred. Then again, even so-called ‘secular history’ does the same. Almost any ‘history’ tells a story, but with perspective, opinion, and judgement (right or wrong) woven within and throughout. Nothing is a subjective as we may wish. This includes law as well. But, I digress.

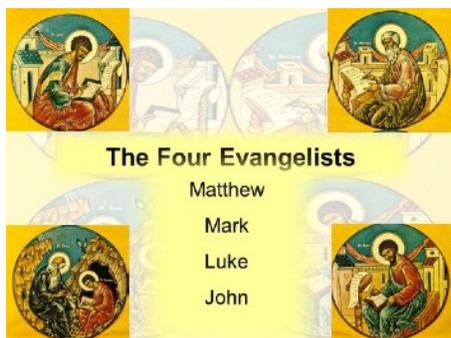
³ No wonder church ‘tradition’ seems dodgy. Sometimes the scriptures themselves tell the histories differently.

⁴ Do you remember in weeks past we spoke of more than one disciple possibly being Jesus’ brothers? Well, John could very well have been one of Jesus’ cousins. John was the son of Zebedee, James the Greater’s younger brother. According to tradition, Salome was their mother. Also according to church tradition, Salome was the sister of Mary, Jesus’ mother, making Salome Jesus’ aunt, and her sons John the Apostle and James Jesus’ cousins. “John the Apostle”, *Wikipedia*, found at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matthew_the_Apostle, accessed, August 29, 2021.



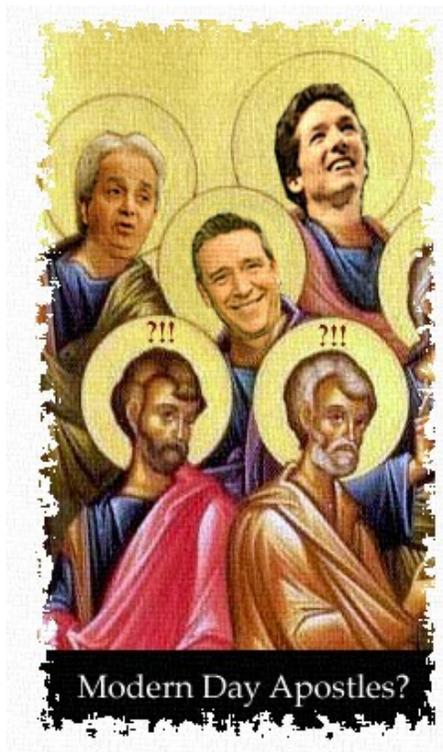
On this island in the southern part of the Aegean Sea, John [envisioned] Jesus the Christ and wrote the prophetic book of Revelation about it. The apostle John was later freed, possibly due to old age, and he returned to what is now Turkey. He died as an old man sometime after AD 98, the only apostle to die peacefully.”⁵

That Matthew’s name is also ‘Levi’ and John being the only disciple other than Judas Iscariot to die of natural causes are interesting tid-bits of information. Yet, such trivia is not inspiring. I would like to conclude by focusing upon that which the two apostles have in common and thus that which can inspire us this morning.



⁵ “Got Questions”, found at: <https://www.gotquestions.org/apostle-John-die.html>, accessed August 28, 2021.

While possible, this would make John almost impossibly old for the time. Rarely did people live almost a century two thousand years ago. The lifespan of the average person in Palestine during the first century, if one lived a full life, was a about 60 years old. If you were wealthy and safe, possibly 70 years.



A theme we are following in this series is: 'How can we at Centre, how can you at Guilford, Dummerston, West Dover, and West Brattleboro churches, be emissaries, apostles, for our churches, for the United Church of Christ, and for the Christian Church as a whole? If we take our cue from the apostles Matthew and John, we will communicate the Christian message in new and different ways. We will tell the story of Jesus the Christ using different mediums. We will reach those who are not within our doors using new technology, platforms, and skills so that like the gospel writers of old we will transcend time and space to proclaim the 'Good News'.



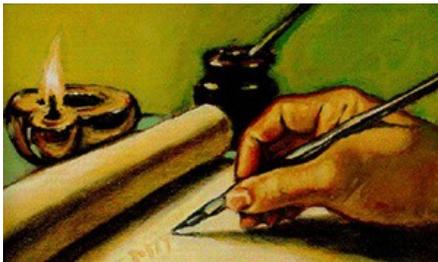
All of us now are now gathered about our screens. Some of us like these computers more than others. Some of us love this virtual thing. Some of us despise it and we would love to throw these damn computers out the window and just go to church. Yet, we all here. We are all here because of the pandemic and this is the best way we know how to be together, to communicate with one another, to show love to one another, to hear the story of the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, Jesus the Christ, and to celebrate the growth of the Christian Church during Ordinary Time.



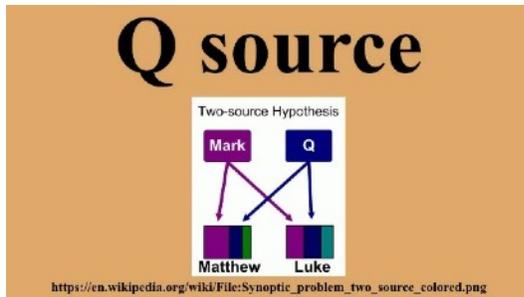
I have three heroes: Bob Keller, Marion Daley, and Gisela Robeck. All three are in their 90s (except Marion, she's an 80s-something youngster!). These three apostles of our church, despite their age, despite their preference for gathered worship in the church, and despite financial limitations, acquired new devices. Perhaps they have not mastered them. Yet, they learned new skills, adapted to

new circumstances, became ‘gerontological techies’, and arguably make more use of modern computer technology than I. *They* are helping build the church with their willingness to adapt and learn new skills. Their willingness to purchase, acquire, and use new equipment strengthens our church. They are our modern-day Matthews and Johns. Please, hear why I make this bold comparison.

Jesus’ ministry concluded early in the fourth decade before most, if not all, of the stories of Jesus were passed-on verbally. Verbal (‘word of mouth’) transmission of Jesus’ lessons and healings worked well within the local sphere of Jerusalem.



But by about forty, fifty, or sixty years after Jesus died, things needed to be written down or they would be forgotten forever – especially after the fall of the Temple and sacking of Jerusalem by Titus and the Romans in 70 AD. So, two of the disciples wrote down what they remembered seeing and hearing when they ministered with Jesus.



If Matthew did not write the gospel of Matthew, then he wrote a document which scholars call 'Q' that sourced Matthew and Luke. 'Q' was, with Mark and some of Paul's letters, one of the earliest written recordings of Jesus' ministry.



The early church in the first century was in a time of terrific vulnerability. So are our churches during the COVID-19 pandemic. Matthew and John took advantage of a technology and writing. With literacy, Matthew and John wrote two accounts that could be duplicated and spread all of over the known world. In the same vain, we in the Windham-Union Association, need to and must be hybrid churches – and thus reach people who will not or cannot come through our doors.



We need to and must acquire the skills to communicate our churches' ministries via Facebook, Twitter, SnapChat, Instagram, and whatever else comes down the pike so that, like Matthew and John, we are able to bring our faith tradition to what is *our* 'gentile' ('unchurched') world.⁹



CHURCH TECH TODAY
TECHNOLOGY FOR TODAY'S CHURCH

We in the Windham-Union Association can and must use projection and audio technology to better communicate the gospel while gathered in the sanctuary. I am thankful that I am a part of an association of churches that is beginning to learn these lessons and already employ them so that we can gather here together this morning as separate congregations. We are well on our way to making the church increasingly relevant and vibrant for the future.

Thank you, Gisela Robeck, Bob Keller, and Marion Daley for being our modern-day 'apostles'. May we who are younger than you have the courage to

⁹ Not just technology can bring ministry to those who do not walk through our doors. We can also do ministry outside our doors. This year, Centre Church began a "The Green at Centre" ministry whereby we host the community and events on our front lawn thus making our church more visible and accessible.

emulate you and thus navigate our churches into modernity and the ways of the future just as the apostles of ol' did.

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