

Marked as Christ's Own Forever

Meta

Date: June 28, 2026

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Readings

Isaiah 2:10–17

Psalms 89:1–18

Romans 6:1–11

Matthew 10:34–42

Opening

Let's begin by returning to the beginning of the service. Most Sundays of the year we begin worship, as we did today, when the priest says, "Blessed be God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." And you, his people, reply, "And blessed be his kingdom now and forever. Amen."

Lovely and fitting liturgical words, but overlay that phrase "blessed be his kingdom" with Jesus' words in Matthew 10 and things get more *complicated*. It's easier to say 'Amen' and "blessed be his kingdom" when Jesus describes the blessing and beauty of the kingdom—when we hear beatitudes; when he compares the kingdom to treasure hidden in a field or a mustard seed fully grown, providing shade and shelter. But it is altogether different to say 'Amen' and 'blessed be his kingdom' when King Jesus says,

*Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword...
Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.*

That's quite a declaration to say 'blessed be this kingdom' with these words of Jesus in mind. That is a difficult 'Amen, so be it.' (It's even more interesting when your extended family has come to visit you this Sunday, as mine has done. Welcome to Apostles and the fifth Sunday of Pentecost, my beloved family).

C.S. Lewis famously wrote in *Mere Christianity* that when we consider Jesus' ultimate claims—about himself and his kingdom—we cannot simply say he was a great moral teacher. Lewis said:

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a

*madman or something worse.*¹

A mere man who requires love that surpasses love for father, mother, sister, or brother would be a megalomaniac or the leader of a cult. But if the God of the universe, through whom the worlds were made; who made us in the image of the Trinity which is Love Eternal; if that God calls us to love him above all other loves, well, we have an altogether matter before us.

¹ *C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity.*

We have come to the end of Matthew 10, our third and final Sunday meditating on these weighty words of Jesus, commissioning his apostles for Kingdom mission. In my mind I've been calling these June Sundays: Lent - Summer Edition.

Matthew 10, particularly the concluding verses, brings us to a crossroads. As I mentioned last week, these words of Jesus are spoken in a mission briefing room of sorts. Our Gospel reading today focuses on the last words Jesus speaks before sending his apostles to proclaim the Kingdom to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

We cannot ignore these difficult words of our Lord, cannot store it away in a spiritual attic, like an item we still keep under our roof, but don't display in the main living spaces of our home. This isn't a postscript, an addendum, about the Kingdom of God. It is the very crux of the Kingdom call—to love Christ above all other loves; to take up our cross and follow our crucified Lord.

Marked By Christ

Last week I led us to read Matthew 10 alongside our liturgy for baptism. And we'll bring our baptism liturgy before us again today as we conclude our meditation on this chapter. So much of our Christian life finds meaning by understanding the depths of our baptism. So...

The first confession we make in our baptism is a response to this question: 'Do you turn to Jesus Christ and confess him as your Lord and Savior?' The two cannot be separated—Savior and Lord. Notably our liturgy places 'Lord' before 'Savior' in that question, too. There can be no rival in our hearts to Christ. //

When I meet with a newly engaged couple seeking marriage at Apostles, my main objective for that first meeting is to talk about the first love of their hearts, which must be Christ Jesus alone. Not one another. If a husband or a wife make one another the ultimate love of their hearts, there will not be spiritual freedom in the marriage. And the temptation of making one's spouse an idol will be near. Christian marriage embraces a paradox of love—the only way for a husband and wife to know unbounded love and joy in their marriage is if both persons place Jesus Christ as the first and ultimate love of their hearts. Their love for another must be baptized, so to speak, in the cross of Christ, so that their love would be raised anew and their marriage lives in resurrection power. Christ must be all in all in the marriage between two Christians.

Back to baptism...Near the end of our baptism liturgy, as I mentioned last week, a newborn son or daughter is sealed with the sign of the cross with the oil of chrism. As he makes the sign of the cross with oil, the priest says "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and *marked as Christ's own forever.*"

And what is that mark? None other than the cross of Jesus—the cross by which we were saved, the cross we take up to follow Jesus Christ, our Lord. When we profess Christ as Lord, Christ claims us as his own. After we're baptized, born anew by water and the Spirit, we receive the family birthmark—the sign of the cross. The priest then prays in thanksgiving that a newborn son or daughter is now adopted by God as his child, made a member of his holy Church.

And what all this says and means sounds scandalous—scandalous to ancient ears and scandalous to modern ears. That the mark of Christ and his Cross; that belonging to his Body, the Church; this spiritual bond surpasses any loyalty or allegiance to our natural family.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German martyr of the 20th century, has been much in mind these past few weeks. Bonhoeffer felt Matthew 10 was central to our faithfulness to Christ and his Kingdom. I offer his thoughts on these words of Jesus today. Bonhoeffer wrote:

Hate toward the word of Jesus' messengers will remain until the end of time. Hate will pronounce the disciples guilty of all the divisions which will come over cities and houses. Jesus and his disciples will be condemned by everyone as destroyers of the family, as forces leading the people astray, as crazy enthusiasts and troublemakers....

(But) (t)he peace of Jesus Christ is the cross. The cross is God's sword on this earth. It creates division. The son against the father, the daughter against her mother, the household against its head, and all that for the sake of God's kingdom and its peace—that is the work of Christ on earth! ... (Bonhoeffer concludes saying):
God's love for the people and human love for their own kind are utterly different. God's love for the people brings the cross and discipleship, but these in turn mean life and resurrection.

Sobering, holy, and wise words from one who laid down his life to remain faithful to Christ. This I believe is the will of God the Father, from whom every **family** in heaven and on earth is named². God desires that every family would be transfigured by the cross of Christ, born anew, walking in the light and power of resurrection; walking in life together in the midst of Christ's Body, the Church.

The Martyr's Love

In preparing for and preaching these last two Sundays, I'm aware that we're in deep waters. And as I preach, I'm aware that I'm out of my depth. These sermons are prayers. I proclaim a faith and devotion I myself seek.

And that goes for more than just these few weeks. Since my twenties and maybe even teenage years, I've carried the question—would I be like Bonhoeffer and other martyrs if the day of decision came to me, to lay down my life for Christ? I think that question matters for all of us. Scripture teaches that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and that question forms the fear of the Lord within us.

Hey, it's the middle of June and no one chose the hard sayings of Jesus. In the middle of swimming and theme park season, here we are. But here's your priest and rector saying to you that I (and we) need the witnesses of martyrs before the eyes of our hearts.

We aren't going to be naturally drawn to the stories of martyrs, mainly because our culture has formed us to be comfortable, to be liked, to get followers. Christ says instead, "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

When you and I were baptized, we renounced the world with all its empty promises and deadly deceptions. The martyrs of Christ's Church didn't just make that vow in word; they bore the marks of that vow on their bodies.

We honor martyrs because of their ability to endure suffering to the end, just as our Lord teaches here in Matthew 10. I commend them to you for another reason, as well. We need to know the martyrs of our faith to be our mentors in love; to teach us love for Christ that surpasses all other loves.

Perpetua and Father

This Saturday we will celebrate Independence Day, a day when we can give thanks for freedoms we enjoy in this land, not the least of which is the freedom to gather and worship our Lord in peace. And we ought to recognize, too, that with these freedoms we enjoy, it has not always been so for our fathers and mothers in the faith.

So I'd like to conclude this morning sharing one of the most beloved martyr stories from the early church—the martyrdom of Sts. Perpetua, a story preserved by the early church from her prison diary. It's a story I shared not long ago, when this same passage from Luke's Gospel was before us last November.

² Ephesians 3.15

We are in Carthage. It is March 203 A.D. Perpetua is a 22 year old woman from a family of good social standing. Perpetua is a Christian, but her father was not.

When Perpetua was arrested for her Christian faith, she is imprisoned with several other young Christians. While she awaited the trial to decide her life, her father visited her in prison. And there he pleaded with Perpetua to just make an idolatrous sacrifice to the emperor. Just burn some incense in public and say "Caesar is Lord." Perpetua responded to her father and pointed to a vase saying, 'Father, do you see this vase here?' 'Yes I do,' her father replied. Perpetua said, 'Could it be called by any other name than what it is?' 'No,' said her father. 'Well, so, too I cannot be called anything other than what I am, a Christian.'

(Her father made a second visit to Perpetua's prison a few days later, making an emotional appeal for her to renounce Christ. To this emotional appeal, Perpetua said, "It will all happen in the prisoner's dock as **God** wills; for you may be sure that we are not left too ourselves but are all in his power.")

Finally Perpetua and her fellow prisoners came to the day of their trial. Each prisoner was asked by the governor of Carthage if he/she was guilty of the charge of being Christian. Each plead guilty, and then came Perpetua's turn. At this moment, Perpetua's father appeared saying, 'Perform the sacrifice.' The governor also made an earnest appeal to Perpetua saying, '(Just) offer the sacrifice for the welfare of the emperors.' Translation: just say "Caesar is Lord."

To which Perpetua replied, 'I will not.'

The governor asked her plainly: 'Are you a Christian?'

Perpetua replied, 'Yes I am.'

It was said the next day that when Perpetua entered the arena where she laid down her life with her brothers and sisters in the Lord, she walked into the arena singing a psalm to the Lord.³

Our fathers and mothers in the faith cherished stories like these, and they needed them to form courage within—courage to love our Lord Jesus Christ above all, at all costs.

And so let us read the Gospel words of our Lord Jesus on our knees. I'm out of my depth, but the communion of saints is not. Let us embrace the stories of saints and martyrs. Take us into the depths, O Lord, that no love rivals our love for you. For no love can rival your love for us—the Love that suffered for us, died for us, rose for us, that we might be delivered from Death, and rewarded with Eternal Life in Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you, O Father, and the Holy Spirit; one God, forever and ever. Amen.

³ Excerpted and paraphrased from The Acts of Christian Martyrs, available via <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/maps/primary/perpetua.html>