Welcome and Introduction

Good evening everyone. It's good to see you, and I want to welcome you here to worship at Christ the King Anglican Church. If I haven't had a chance to meet you personally, my name is Jesse and I get to be one of the pastors here. It's always a joy to worship here together with you and to be gathered like we did at the beginning to set this time apart, to make it different for him, and to open God's word and come to the table together. Welcome to all of you, and again, it's always good to be here with you, so thank you for blessing us all here this evening.
Well, this evening we are in Matthew chapter 10 and we are going to look at the passage that Stephen read here from the middle. In fact, he didn't read all of it because we're going to look at the section that he didn't read, mostly because I didn't want the kids to hear "hate your mother and your father" or "love me more than your children" without a good explanation. We're actually going to be looking at that idea.

The Lectionary and the Full Counsel of God

A quick note about how we choose our sermon texts here at this church: we follow something called the lectionary. The lectionary is what you might call the original Bible reading plan. It was what the church fathers used all through history to help guide the church as it moves through the Bible. What this does for us is that it allows us to learn and to sit under the full counsel of God as he's revealed through the whole of the scriptures.

Now, if you've read through different parts of the Bible, you know that there are parts that are very easy to understand and very good to hear. They're pleasant on our ears, and if I had my choice I would just preach those all the time. "God forgives you," "there's grace," "be filled with joy"—I mean, that would be sort of easy, right? But there are also parts in the scriptures that are hard for us to understand and often hard for us to hear. This evening's passage can be hard for us to understand and hard for us to hear.

When we move through the lectionary, we expose ourselves and we become serious students of the scriptures to allow God to shape our whole souls and our whole lives through his whole counsel, not just through the things that feel easy for us to read and to do. Now, we do have some license in that we do move passages around sometimes. In the month of July, come back—we'll be doing a whole series on the book of Proverbs—but 93% of the time we spend time in the lectionary, so that's how we land on these passages.

Ordo Amoris: The Order of Our Loves

As I mentioned, this evening's passage, at least to our untrained ears, can be more challenging at first glance on its surface because Jesus uses arresting language as a way to get our attention. He says things like, "I have come to set family against family, to bring the sword instead of peace." Like many hard passages in the scripture, at least on the surface, it can be very off-putting. But as we begin to peel back the layers and see what Jesus is saying, we'll see that these words are direct and challenging as they are, but they're actually meant to give us

freedom and to actually give us more joy and to allow us to love others and love things in the world even better, even though it doesn't seem like that at first glance.

The interpretive key that helps us as we approach this passage comes from two words in Latin. Sorry, I just love throwing in Latin words sometimes; when you switch languages, it forces you to pay more attention. The two words that I love using, or that are our interpretive key for us here, are *ordo amoris*. *Ordo amoris* means "the order of our loves." That is that God not only wants us to love the right things, but he wants us to love the right things in the right order.

The church father that coined that term, or at least is most famous for it, is named Augustine. In the language of the early church, he saw the order of loves not just as a single line where you put God at the top. You know, you have number 10, number nine—watching soccer, that might be number seven or whatever it is during World Cup season. It's not just that there's a line of your loves and you put God at the top, but the question is more of: where do your loves point you? How does your love shape and form your soul? Do your loves point you to God, or is God just another one on the list? Do we allow something else to shape and form our souls? Is God in the same category as our other loves, or is he in a very different category altogether? Do we align all our loves towards God? That's this concept of *ordo amoris*.

What Jesus is doing here in this passage is drawing our attention; he's causing us to ask the question: What is it that we love? How do we love what we love? How is it shaping and forming our souls after what he wants for us? That's what we're going to examine together here today is the order of our loves.

A Prayer for Revelation

Let me pray for us and then we'll open the scriptures here. Lord, let the truth of your scriptures be like a double-edged sword, piercing bone from marrow, soul from spirit, revealing the chief desires and the loves of our hearts—would you reveal them now to us? Would you let us stand under your loving gaze to be examined by your spirit and your word, and would you allow us to form our lives and our hearts around what you desire for us? So open our hearts and our minds as we open the scripture, we pray in your name, amen.

The Sword of Radical Change

So we're in Matthew chapter 10 again, and starting here in verse 34, Jesus uses this first striking image of the sword: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword." Immediately, even if you're a longtime Christian, immediately this can be very off-putting and confusing. Isn't Jesus supposed to be the Prince of Peace? Don't the angels sing about his peace throughout all generations? In fact, don't the prophets talk about this Prince of Peace bringing about a kingdom where swords are beat into plowshares? Isn't that who Jesus is? Why would Jesus say he's bringing the sword instead of peace?

Well, when we look through the life of Jesus and his teaching, one of the things that we see Jesus do so often is to ensure and really call out and make sure that people are paying attention

to what he came to do and who he was, and that was he came to bring about complete and radical change of the created order. He came to change literally the cosmos, heaven and earth. He came to bring radical change to that, and he came to bring radical change to our own hearts and into our own lives—in fact, to make us completely new people.

His call on our lives is not sort of like a, "Yeah, I kind of hope that you consider, maybe sometime thinking about possibly making some subtle changes to the way you approach things, you know, when you get around to it possibly if your heart would be so inclined into that direction." He's not saying that kind of thing. He often uses these strong words to break us out of our patterns and our molds to say, "Pay attention to what I'm saying here."

The Scalpel of the Physician

In the case of the sword, this idea is that Christ came to wage war against the status quo, wage war against darkness, wage war with the ways of the world, and there's a cutting off that comes when Christ enters into the world. Now, John Chrysostom, he was a fifth-century church leader, and he preached on this sermon—maybe next time I'll just read it straight and it'll be a really great one—but one of the excerpts from his sermon, he sort of compared this sword that Jesus is talking about to a scalpel. He said this in his sermon: "The most perfect peace comes when that which is diseased and dead is lopped off, when that which introduces strife is taken away. For so only is it possible that heaven should be joined to earth. For so does the physician save the rest of the body, namely by cutting off that which cannot be healed."

So when Jesus says that he did not come to bring peace but the sword, what he's saying is that he came to bring radical change. The reason I love this quote from Chrysostom so much is he uses that phrase "heaven being joined to earth." Christ is coming to bring radical change so that we may know what it is like for heaven to be joined to earth in our own hearts, so that we would know what it means to be caught up with this great transformation that Christ is making throughout all of history and all of time, so that we would know what it means to be united with him, to know his perfection and his goodness in our lives.

It's like a surgeon coming to you and saying, "What you have is cancer; don't worry, I'm going to cut it away. It's going to be uncomfortable, it might sound severe and feel severe, but ultimately the reason I'm doing this is to bring you life. Once it's removed, you will know new life and this will bring you joy and peace." So again, it's not bad; it is good. Christ is pointing us to fullness of life together with him.

Examining Our Highest Loves

So that's the sword—that's the first thing that's hard to deal with. The second thing that is perhaps even more challenging for us to deal with is what Jesus says next. He says: "Whoever loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; whoever does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

Three times Jesus here uses this phrase "not worthy of me," as in, you will not know the unification, this goodness that I promise, you will not know it; you are not worthy of me if you do these things. Then, as that idea lands, as Jesus talks about bringing the sword, he immediately focuses our ideas on our loves: the things that we should love the most deeply—our parents, our children, the things that matter most deeply in life.

Again, what is Jesus doing here? Is he saying, "Hate your mother and your father, hate your children, give it all up, join a cult, move away from everything"? He of course is not saying that because in the entirety of the scriptures, they tell us to love and honor our parents; they tell us to love and honor and take care of our children, and Jesus took this to be true. But again, what he's challenging us to here is what we would call again *ordo amoris*: to examine the order of our loves. In this list of priorities that we would have, God would be our aim, the place where we're driving our souls, and the rest of our love for everything else would flow from this right ordering, setting God first before us, and then everything flows from that. Still with me? Good.

The Cost of Following Christ

Now I want to take a few moments to locate these ideas that Jesus is talking about in our own lives, in our own experiences. What does this look like? I think we can understand the main concept: Jesus wants us to orient all of our lives around him. What does this look like in our lives?

Well, in some cultures, in some families, there is either a strong antagonism towards Christianity, or they come from a family setting or cultural setting where to know Christ or to call yourself a Christian would be a deep betrayal of your family and a deep betrayal of your future. So sadly, people are often left with a personal choice: do they honor their parents and do they follow the ways of their culture or even the ways of their family, or do they turn to Christ and call themselves a Christian? They risk the ease of being at peace with their relationships or their parents or their children for their faith in Jesus Christ.

As someone that got to live overseas, I got to see this happen all the time, or I was sad to observe this happen all the time where people literally had a choice between being at peace with their family or coming to faith in Jesus Christ. In that case, this image hits on the nose: love me more than your culture, love me more than what you're supposed to do.

I've seen this here in the US where people might come from maybe a strong cultural movement or a strong political movement where they're in the ways of the world and all of a sudden they come to faith, and this group of people that accepted them and were aligned with them, all of a sudden when they tell them that they're a Christian, they say basically in word and deed, "You're dead to us; you're no longer worthy of our time and our attention."

Side note, by the way: there are probably statistically, even in a room this small, there are probably people who have come to faith and live their faith at great cost to themselves, at great cost to their families and to their friends and into their relationships. If you're someone like me who gets to grow up in a loving Christian family where faith is aligned, we can take for granted

the fact that some people cross major chasms to come to faith in Jesus Christ, and so we should always be aware of their own situations. Sometimes loving God more than your parents or more than your children is very direct.

Subtle Disordering and the Weight of the Soul

For most of us, most of the time, though, it's more subtle. We love the right things but in the wrong order, and we put the wrong emphasis on them. For example, if you think about Jesus's second example, he said, "If you love your children more than me, then you're not worthy of me." Jesus would say adamantly, "Loving your children of course is good. Loving your family is good."

But when that love gets out of order, when the love for kids takes first place and is oriented only at your love of kids as their *telos*, then somewhere along the way, the love that we might have for them morphs, where their happiness becomes our happiness, where their success becomes our identity. Then, without meaning to, they have to hold the weight for our own meaning in life, where we look to them and their success and their happiness and we say, "If they're happy, then I'm happy," and we place all the meaning of our lives upon them. Of course, children can't carry that weight for our meaning and our fulfillment, and we end up disappointed and they end up crushed. This is how disordering our loves can morph the good love that God has for us.

Think about how we rest here in Colorado or just broadly. Sabbath is good, restoration is good, resting is good, being out in nature is very good. But when our rest gets out of order, when our recreation becomes the first thing in our lives, when we direct our entire lives towards our rest or our Sabbath or our own personal optimization, then somewhere along the way the weekend becomes the whole point of the week and that trip becomes the whole point of that season. Then church and community and serving and being present in the world gets squeezed out of our calendars for the sake of being able to have these experiences.

Here's the rub: the goal here as we do all of these experiences and travel is to feel life and to feel energized and to feel fulfilled and to truly experience all the goodness of this world. But when we get that out of order, when we place that at the very top of our list, when it's the main thing we're orienting our lives for—I don't know if you've experienced this—we come back from that trip or we come back from that rest and we find that we are actually still very tired, that we're still actually restless in our souls and we're still very hungry.

Now, it's summertime, it's Colorado—please don't hear me saying don't go on vacation. Nobody hear me say that, please do. But the question that we're asking is how do we orient our life and to what direction are our loves ordered? Our love will form us. So if we deeply love rest above all things, that will form us, the people that are directed in that direction. This is the pattern that plays out in many things in our lives: good things—love of country, love of seeing change happen, love of your career, love of being a unique and interesting person in a sea of billions of people that sound the same, love of frictionless community, love of relationships. All of these things are good, but again, if we order our lives to them, then those are the things that begin to shape us.

The Freedom of Right Ordering

What Jesus is saying is that he is the only one that can shape us, and he is the only one that can bear the weight of our souls. When we get the things that are meant to be subordinate to our love of God first, then our love becomes deforming instead of forming. We crush those things because they can't carry the weight of who we are and what we want in life.

Now here's the good news—I promised this payoff at the beginning—there's actually more freedom and more joy, and we can better love all of these good things when we rightly order our lives around our love for God. C.S. Lewis, our good friend, of course, chimes in here more eloquently than I could ever write it. He says this: "When I have learned to love God better than my earthly dearest, I shall love my earthly dearest better than I do now." When I learned to love God better than my earthly dearest, I shall love my earthly dearest better than I do now.

When we rightly order our love to God first, it lets us be better parents and better spouses. It lets us go to the mountains and enjoy them even better. It lets us embrace in movements of change in our culture, but not embrace it in a way where we have to see change happen in order to feel fulfilled in our souls. We can be free to enter into these things with joy and peace, ordering our love around God, because we're not placing our need for meaning and fulfillment on anything else on the list but for God and who he is.

Forgiving Each Other for Not Being God

There was a writer and a chaplain named Henri Nouwen—many of you might know his name—and he wrestled with this in many different arenas. He was a writer at Harvard, he was sort of on the top of his game in the mid-80s, and he found, though, that he wasn't very happy. He was somebody also that wrestled with deep relationships in friendships, and I love his reflection on how God called him to reorder his love.

Henri Nouwen said this: "I reached a healthy place in my life and my walk with God in which I was able to stop projecting my needs on another human being. We both came to understand that each of us is limited in our capacity to be for another what is needed, and learn to forgive each other for not being God."

That phrase that Nouwen names there—"forgiving each other for not being God"—is exactly what Jesus is after here for us in our lives. The sword isn't a sword to bring destruction; the sword is a sword to cut away the things and to reorder our loves so that we are better able to love God and to love the world around us. It frees us from asking our kids to be God in our lives, or the mountains, or our trips, or our career, or even the people closest to us. It frees us from leaning on them to be our meaning and our fulfillment in our lives, but to allow God to be God—the only source of what this is for us.

Conclusion and Call to Devotion

So these are hard words, but ultimately they're words of kindness. As you're in the mountains enjoying the mountains, maybe as you're on a break, maybe as you go to work, maybe as you spend time with your children or that person that you really enjoy being around, I want to invite you to examine what love in your own hearts has crept out of order. What love is drawing your heart to orient your whole life around it instead of God? To allow the Holy Spirit to come in and show you the ways that you have perhaps been kicked out of kilter and focused in the wrong direction.

Now I'll just say personally for my life, examine is one good part—I want to invite you to examine yourselves and allow the Holy Spirit to do that. But the second thing I want to encourage you to do is just to spend time in deep devotion to our Lord, to spend time silently together with him. Maybe it's in the Psalms praying, maybe it's in a quiet place just by yourself, but a time of deep devotion in him. Because I find that when I try really hard to reorder my loves, it's really hard to do. But when I come away with a deep time and presence with the Lord, my loves are automatically reordered around what he wants for him.

So I want to invite us as a church to be mature, to turn our hearts to him, to allow the Holy Spirit to examine your loves, to turn your hearts to him—the only author and perfecter of our faith that can bear the weight of all of our meaning. C.S. Lewis again said, "When I have learned to love God better than my earthly dearest, I shall love my earthly dearest better than I do now."

Let me pray for us. Lord, as the hymn says, tune our hearts to sing your praise. May you sit at the center of our hearts; may we orient all of our loves towards you. And Lord, the promise that you mention in the scriptures, as you've shown out through the history of the church, Lord, is that when we love you in the right way, that we are better able to love all the rest of the things in our lives. So Lord, make this promise come true in our lives, that by the power of your Holy Spirit we would enter into the world better ready to love because we know your love for us. So help us to respond to you, Lord, and open our hearts to you. We pray all of this in your great and holy name, amen.