

What if church wasn't somewhere you go, but something you do?

“COMMIT”

Who am I? Who are we? Questions of identity arise throughout our lives. As we grow up, and go through our school years, we wrestle with all of this. *I am Amy's friend, I am good at sports, I am really smart, I wear cool clothes. I don't have a good friend, I'm bad at sports, I am not very smart, my clothes are all wrong.* It can be tough at different points.

We may get better at navigating this over time, but there still can be difficult life passages through all our adult years. My husband is thinking of retiring a year from next March, after he turns 66. When discussing retirement with some extended family, two men who have been retired a number of years both told him emphatically, “DON'T!” In the discussion that followed they pointed out two main challenges they had discovered in retirement: MONEY (not enough) , and a clouded SENSE OF IDENTITY--- no longer knowing WHO YOU ARE, WHAT YOU DO, and THAT YOU HAVE VALUE.

As Christians, we have an identity that we also may wrestle with on occasion. We may think, “I'm a church member; I'm a Christian—that's the heart of who I am.” But what does that mean? What does it look like?

The passage we heard from Isaiah is one of my favorites because it answers the question, “Who am I?” In this passage, God states it clearly: ***YOU ARE MINE! Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine.***

There is such comfort and power in knowing this—it's life changing and life giving. However, we can get too comfortable with this. We feel so blessed and renewed, helped and healed from past mistreatment or denigration we've experienced in our lives, that we figure this is all there is to being Christian. We just sit around and feel the joy! We get together with others, sing and pray and feel the joy!

Let's think about this Isaiah text a bit more. These words bring alive God's promises to be my faithful and mighty companion and protector. But please note: God is not sitting with me, loving me in a safe place where I can sing and pray and feel joy. He is my protector as I cross turbulent rivers and navigate stormy seas; he is my protector and companion as I walk through fiery infernos. There is MOVEMENT in this passage. The understanding is that, with God as my companion, life will consist of many journeys, dangers and trials. There is nothing static in this passage. Either I am moving through various challenges and situations with God, OR God is moving all over the earth on my behalf. God is committed to you, to me. God will not rest, but will always be acting for our good. God CLAIMS YOU and is COMMITTED TO YOU.

In the sacrament of baptism we name and celebrate this fact. God claims the one being baptized. And in all of the accounts of Jesus' baptism, God names and claims Jesus as his beloved Son, with whom he is pleased.

Today, in the United Methodist Church, baptism is the sacrament of initiation into the body of Christ, the Church, which joins the newly baptized with Christians everywhere. It is also the beginning of a lifelong process of growth in Christ. Having celebrated and received God's claim on us, we commit our lives to Christ as our Lord and Savior.

Baptism tells us we BELONG, meeting a deep human longing and need. It's another precious gift to us—not only does God claim us and commit to us, but God has provided us with a place where we BELONG—given us a community where we are welcomed and embraced.

And friends, in the church, this is often RIGHT WHERE WE STOP. We've found the answers we yearn for—Who am I? The question has been answered: I am God's own, **claimed** and **committed to**. I **belong** to the community of God's people, the Church. We then attend worship to be reminded of these truths and to celebrate them. And that's what being a Christian is all about.

This understanding underlies the way we talk about the Christian community—the way we talk about church. We think being a church member means we “go to church”. Friends, the church **gathers to worship**; we don't really “go to church”. I know the phrase is so long-standing that we aren't likely to drop it anytime soon, and I confess I use that phrase myself. But it is really all wrong!

When we commit our lives to Christ, we are not DONE with anything! We are just beginning a journey, becoming a part of the MOVEMENT of Christ followers all over the world. Following baptism, we **commit** to following Jesus. Jesus will lead us to **many** places—not just the church building on Sunday mornings for worship and study.

When we join any group, it is not the LAST thing we do, but the FIRST. We don't just sit around with other members, but we do the tasks that group was constituted to do. As Christians, we are sorely tempted to take root in comfort and evolve into “pew potatoes” to use the vivid phrase Jim Best has provided us.

You can become a Christian in a moment. You cannot become a disciple overnight. The Christian life is not an “instant” recipe that can be mixed up in a minute.

The United Methodist Church has recognized this and has provided us with a provocative question as we seek to be faithful disciples: **What if the church wasn't somewhere you go, but something you do?**

Commit your life to Christ; you will then be on the move.

Columbia University professor Leo Braudy, a scholar of English literature, developed three images for understanding literary theory that can be helpful to us in exploring the ways the Holy Spirit moves in the life committed to Christ.

First there is the “Tweed Jacket” image. This aspect of a life committed to Christ focuses on the rudiments of faith. This activity enables the church community to transmit its traditions and teach the basic bedrock of our faith. This is an indispensable aspect of the life of faith. We need to learn and teach; we need to reflect and discuss; we need to read Scripture and the words of those who reflect on Scripture. But this is not enough!

We need the “Sweat Pants” aspect of faith as well. Believers must exercise their faith in their daily lives. If we only wear tweed jackets, we will not venture far beyond our homes and church buildings. God calls us to make the traditions of the faith come alive for current generations.

Biblical scholar James D.G. Dunn, in his book *The Living Word* affirms this as vitally important for the church today. In Judeo-Christian tradition “authoritative tradition was not regarded as something fixed and static. It was a living tradition, and as such was lived in and through, by means of elaboration and reworking...” In Dunn’s view, faithful tradition must be expressed again and again in ways that connect with and meet the needs of a different day and situation.

The sweat-suited believer endeavors to actively engage a Sunday faith in a Monday world. This is a hugely important step beyond the “going to church” way of trying to live as a Christian. This is a vital aspect of following Jesus, but it continues to allow us to function in an environment where we are comfortable. We stay in our workplace, our neighborhood, our school, our socio-economic corner of the world. There is vital work we do there, but that’s not the whole story either!

We need to have the courage to put on a “wet suit” as faithful followers of Jesus Christ. Wet suits allow people to become immersed completely in a new and strange, even potentially hostile, environment. A wet-suited faith allows for creativity and bold exploration in new situations. Bits of tweed and fleece make up the insulation of the wetsuit, and are vital to its functioning. The big thing about the wetsuit is that when we wear it we accept risk, discomfort, and even threats of various kinds. We move forward even when afraid.

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Oh, can’t we just stick with the joy of knowing we are claimed as God’s own, and we belong to his people?

No. Not if we want to follow Jesus.

Friends, think about the clothing images we've considered. When we are pew potatoes we wear a little tweed. Being present for worship as the gathered community helps us learn the basics of our faith, helps us grow in our understanding of Scripture and our familiarity with God's Word. But if we are going to follow Jesus we have to put on sweatpants when we get home. We need to live our Monday to Saturday lives with what we have learned while wearing the tweed jackets.

Then, friends, there will be times when following Jesus means we put on a wetsuit and go where we have not gone before. We will be called to be uncomfortable and take some risks for Christ's sake.

(Share illustration/s about ministry situation that terrified me.)

Commit your life to Christ; you will then be on the move.

Prior to the 1989 revolution in Romania, a tourist who crossed the border from Hungary into Romania was asked three questions by the customs officials:

***Do you have any Bibles?***

***Do you have any porno?***

***Do you have any drugs?***

What does that tell us? Surely that all three of these things can impact society in major ways. We all can agree on the negative impact of porno and drugs in any society--- but what about the Bible? The powers in Romania at the time knew that lives faithful to the teachings of the Bible would present a radical challenge to their leadership.

I fear that our approach to living our faith has been much too tame, too static, too comfortable. I fear that we keep our Bibles inside the church building to look at on Sunday mornings. I fear that we just want to go to church and let our faith rest there. But if we do, we are not really following Christ. We are not living as the church.

Commit your life to Christ. Pack up your tweed jacket, sweat pants and wet suit. For with him, you will need them, as you move forward on the road of faith.