

## Uncomfortable Commitment

Hebrew 10:22-25 (CEB)

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Rev. Dr. Patrick Schultz

This morning's sermon "*Uncomfortable Commitment*" is the last in this series of Uncomfortable Faith and Uncomfortable Church.

To paraphrase what I said early in this series (and in a variety of ways throughout the series):

*"A healthy relationship with the church is like a healthy marriage. It only works when you are grounded in selfless commitment and an attitude that says, it's not all about me and what I want or even what I think I need."*

The challenge and beauty of an uncomfortable church is very similar to the challenge and beauty of a marriage. First you have to find the right one and then you commit to staying with that one for better or for worse.

When trying to find the right church, we understand there is no perfect church. That's part of the beauty of church – itself! Church is made up of imperfect people and of sinners. People who want to learn more about God and what that teaches about living our lives today.

So, if there is no perfect church – how do I know which one is right for me?

Before I married Brenda; I would think about what I wanted in a wife.

Someone who would share my passion for ministry.

Someone who would watch football games with me.

Someone who would spend Saturday afternoons reading books with me, taking naps on the couch and talk about the mysteries of the Divine God.

Someone who had the same interests as me –

but not too much interest because I still needed my space.

Someone who would challenge me –  
but not too much because I didn't want to lose my self-confidence.

Brenda was some of those things but not all of them. If she's not perfect in every way should I keep looking – move on – find that perfect mystery woman for me?  
I'd still be looking today!

As I got to know her more and more, I realized while she wasn't perfect, she was the best wife for me. We weren't always the *most* compatible, but we were a great combination. Our differences complemented and stretched each other. And on the days I would forget she would faithfully remind me – I'm the best wife ever, for you. 😊

Compatibility is important when we think about someone as our future husband or wife; and it plays a part of finding a church. But compatibility isn't everything.

Commitment matters more than compatibility and dating is part of the discernment process for us. But if we never commit ~ if we only ever date, it'll be a merry go round that never stops. At some point we need to commit, fully knowing that we aren't perfectly compatible, but we are perfectly covered by the grace of God and perfectly empowered by the Holy Spirit to make it work.

The same goes for marrying a church! But, how do we know what is commitment material in the church we're looking for?

Sometimes when we are looking for something as important as this ~ we ask ourselves the wrong questions. And I struggle with these questions as well, especially when I'm discerning and working through the vision of the church and what is most important for the followers of Christ, as Jesus has taught us.

If the questions I'm asking are: What will keep the congregation happy? What will keep the congregation comfortable? Should we always do it the way we've always done it? How do I not ruffle any feathers? How do I make it easy for us?

If those are my questions – I'm moving in the wrong direction.

Similarly, when looking for a church to make a commitment to: if the searcher asks – Did I like that kind of service? Did I like their style of music? Do they have the kind of program I can ease into without disruption to my life? Did the pastor remember my name?

Then as a searcher I'm moving in the wrong direction.

Instead, I should be asking questions like:

Is the teaching and preaching Bible-based? Is this church, children invested? Is this a nonheretical church where Jesus is the hero? Is there holiness here? Does my conscience move me toward this? Do the challenges this church puts out there, test me? Can I grow and serve here?

All of this is not to say church should be painful and agonizing ~ otherwise it just ain't church!

It's not that at all. What I am saying is that church should not be a place of complacency. It should be a place where comfort is found; where we feel safe and encouraged to learn about our faith and more about Christ. It should be a place where we can ask questions and not be ridiculed. It should be a place where all types of people are welcomed and encouraged to come.

It should also be a place where we are stretched, beyond our comfort, that we might better understand what it means to be a follower of Christ.

In this realization, it becomes clear that this is about commitment rather than consumerism; and finding ways to serve rather than being served; filling a need rather than finding a niche.

This is uncomfortable, but it is a crucial cost of discipleship.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a theologian, scholar, pastor, writer, lecturer in Germany and New York, was arrested and eventually martyred under Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime. He contributed greatly to today's theology through his writings and preaching and a constant seeking of social justice.

He said two things of importance to us here today; that were at the core of his theology:

1) The church as a human society is not an ideal society. It is not a gathering of the gifted. It is instead a product of God's action in history and human reality. And as such the church is a "*communion of sinners*" as well as "*a community of saints touched by the saving acts of Christ.*"

When I was in my early years of being called into ministry I had this vision of what church was like ~ filled with kind, generous people. Where everyone got along. There was mutual respect and deep desire to love one another, forgive one another, care for one another – every day!

As I spent more time in ministry: media ministry, mentoring confirmands, going on mission trips, then preaching on Sunday mornings I began to realize *that* was an ideal that would never truly be reached. And as my ministry evolved into pastoral and leading churches – I more fully realized, it's *not* what I imagined it to be.

But! With my commitment to Christ's call I also realized is that there are moments in ministry: Sunday School with the kids; Bible study with grown-ups; confirmation with teens; meetings with church leaders; worship services where the congregation is truly connected and touched; or when someone sings a solo and it's as if an angel is singing; or the act of serving the sacraments of baptism and communion; as well as performing marriages and presiding over funerals...

And someone in the congregation really feels the presence of the Holy Spirit or a message sticks with someone else leads to a life changing response... or a baptism brings together family who had not been getting along.

Or the confirmation of a 13-14-year-old sets in motion a response to a calling in ministry. And that confirmand goes on to become a pastor, a music leader, a lay minister, or a professor of theology and preaching.

These moments are rich and full of God's Spirit. The revelation is that it's not all about me or you specifically, but our commitment to Christ's call upon our lives and what that means for the greater kingdom of God.

The second thing Bonhoeffer did was this:

2) He had successfully left Germany and the impending Nazi movement. He was in New York City, lecturing and teaching at Union Theological Seminary. After a year of doing so he came to the realization through much prayer and soul searching that he should be back in Germany. God's will for him had been clarified ~ that he must live through this difficult period of his national history with the Christian people of Germany. He would have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if he didn't share the trials of this time with his people.

He recognized the importance of commitment ~ even if it meant discomfort and perilousness in his life. Because he was committed to God, he didn't see it as optional but necessary.

Is it off-putting to hear me say these words? That we need to raise the bar of our commitment to church and Christ? Does it cause some discomfort and a bit of – but he doesn't know what my life is like! Does this message or this whole series turn you off or away?

I'll be honest with you – it makes me feel uncomfortable! To both hear and give this message and series. But, I'm committed to raising the bar of expectations for myself *and for you*. Because truth be told, we need to be committed to sticking with a church, not because it's a *good fit* for us, but because it is *fitting us* to become more like Jesus.

Will you embrace the awkwardness and inconvenience and uncool costliness of the uncomfortable church? I will. Right alongside you.