

Contours of the Christian Life: Why Episcopal Identity Matters
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March 18, 2026

Why might Episcopal identity matter? Do we need this church – or really, any church - to follow Jesus? For some, the answer is obvious. Of course, we need the church. Christianity is not an invention of our own private making; it has a 2000-year track record (for better and for worse) and the testimonies of billions both dead and alive to back it up. We cannot create or sustain something that big on our own; it's the height of hubris to try.

If we want to cobble together a belief system of our own making, ignore the context and integrity of our faith, and end up fashioning a god that looks remarkably like us, then certainly we don't need the church for that. But if we want to follow Jesus, we need something more than our own private thoughts and imaginings, don't we?

Reinhold Niebuhr in his book *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* commended the church for being what he called a "community of grace" in an untrusting, unforgiving world. It's a place to practice what he called "the graces of neighborliness;" we can model for each other here on a smaller scale the behavior we need to give and receive from the world at large. It is here in the church – where we see each other up close and don't have the luxury of abstractions – that we learn how to be Christians in community.

In many ways, it takes more bravery and courage to follow Christ in the church than outside it. We're held accountable for our actions here not only by a watching world, but by each other. We take responsibility for the label of "Christian" here and try to live up to it – unlike those who carp from the sidelines and play Monday morning quarterback.

Let's face it - self-deception is just as much a danger outside the church as inside it. Add to the spiritual dangers of living outside the church: self-absorption. At least here we're reminded frequently of our obligation to give of our time, talent and treasure. Skepticism and cynicism are easy; they don't really cost us anything. Commitment to a group of people whose purpose and mandate exceeds our own is what changes us and forces us to grow up.

Besides, where else are all generations present to learn from one another? Can you think of another institution where children, teens and adults come into regular contact as equals, where we're given as much of an opportunity to see life from another generation's perspective?

We learn things in church that I'm not sure we learn elsewhere. We learn that our suffering isn't really unique and that we can comfort others with the comfort we've received - in all sorts of ways. We might not know how to counsel someone who's grieving, but we know how to host a reception where they don't have to worry about the details. We know how to show up here week after week and be part of the stability and structure that will help to pull

those who are suffering through. We know how to work together to create something beautiful here – something we couldn't come up with or sustain on our own.

The church offers us a bigger community to belong to – bigger than the mixed blessings of our families, bigger than the transient nature of our neighborhoods, bigger than the common interests of our civic groups, bigger than the political boundaries of our country. While it can make the Bible and its ancient figures come alive for us, the church also offers us something beyond the boundaries of the book. The church can give us heroes, flesh and blood examples of those who have followed Christ in their own generations.

Or in the words of Benedictine nun Joan Chittister – a hero of mine - in her book *Called to Question*: “(The church) presents us with an historic stream of witnesses from every people on earth who chose the holy, in the face of rejection and ridicule, whatever the cost to themselves. They dared courage, rather than cooperation with evil...They stood for justice, rather than self-interest. They sought the transcendent, rather than the immediate. We walk in line with those, religion reminds us, who gave themselves for the great things of God. Doubters themselves perhaps, thinkers always, they clung to a faith beyond the institution itself, beyond the ‘answers,’ because there is a place, they knew, where answers end. And it is religion that taught them that.”

So, what is it that the Episcopal Church in particular has to offer? (My thanks to Dwight Zscheile and his book *People of the Way* for helping me put this into words.)

One thing we offer is time-tested words and images for prayer and reflection – in Scripture, in the Prayer Book – language that has sustained people for hundreds, even thousands of years. We're given stable anchors for wisdom and meaning. Here we're offered the gift of a common narrative – so we don't have to make it all up as we go. We can locate our own stories within the context of a larger story of God and God's people.

And we're offered the gift of a community to read and reflect with us. We have the insights of others who are trying to live faithfully too, people who can help us see things from the vantage points of different professions and experiences – who can affirm as well as challenge our interpretations. We're tied here to people we might very well disagree with but can still try to learn from. This doesn't make self-deception impossible, of course; but it does help to guard against it.

Particularly as Episcopalians, we're also offered the gift of freedom of conscience. There's room for disagreement. Our approach to most theological matters is expansive; we don't claim to have an exclusive corner on the truth. We have a high threshold for complexity and mystery in the Episcopal Church. While we struggle to articulate our boundaries sometimes, there is legitimate room here to question – to explore and to grow. The fact that we can do that in the context of ancient roots with eyes and ears that are wide-open to the challenges of today and tomorrow is astounding, to me anyway.

The church gives us a place to offer thanks and share our burdens – in the context of ordered, embodied prayer. We're given a kind of road map for how others have drawn close to Christ and are offered ways to respond not just with our minds and hearts, but with our bodies too. We discover ways to focus and find peace. We're given practices that help us recognize and honor the sacred in the everyday – in things like bread and water and wine. Here we develop our lens for seeing how God is active outside this place and are given the strength to be the body of Christ in the rest of our lives.

Church is a place where we can discover and develop our gifts. We may not know all that we're good at until someone asks us to do something we never knew we could do. Ask anyone who's ever been recruited for a church committee, to be an acolyte or lay reader, a teacher or mentor – or a Vestry member, for that matter; chances are, they've learned something new about themselves and what they have to offer.

Here we can start to find our place in the much larger body of Christ. We are offered opportunities to give and serve through justice ministries and together extend our reach much farther than we could have ever managed on our own. The mission that Jesus set out for himself – to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor – it's just too hard for lone rangers to do. The church gives us a place to practice compassion, to follow the example set by Jesus, and to experience the grace we need to keep trying when we inevitably fall short of the mark.

So, does Episcopal identity matter? Do we need the church to follow Jesus? I can't speak for everyone. But I know that my life has been enriched unimaginably – and challenged nearly as much – by the Episcopal Church, and it's given me far too much for me to walk away from it. It's even given me the tools to critique it - and to keep working to make it better. Thanks be to God.