Identity theft has been called the crime of the 21st century. Identity theft cost American businesses and consumers 50 billion dollars last year. This crime claimed 10 million victims last year. When people steal our personal information, our name, credit cards, social security numbers, the results can be horrific. Some of you can attest to such trauma from personal experience.

I’d like to talk about another kind of identity theft, the theft of your own self. God created each of us with a unique identity. No one else possesses your specific DNA or fingerprints. There is, quite literally, no one else like you. Yet, something seeks to undermine this God-given sense of self. The Bible calls it sin. Sin is not merely doing bad things; sin allows good things to become ultimate things.

Our tendency is to build our identities on something other than God. Suppose you build your identity on performance, on what you do. There’s nothing wrong with performing to the best of our abilities. But when we center our identities on performance, we end up with a distortion. When identity becomes tied to performance, our self-worth will be determined by how well we perform.

We can build our identities on most anything—appearance, ethnicity, gender, career, possessions, you name it. There’s nothing wrong with identifying with these traits or roles in society. But God never intended them to bear the full weight of our identities.

Psychologist Erik Erikson introduced the phrase “identity crisis” into our vernacular to describe an intense period of role confusion and identity. Although this role confusion is most often acute in adolescence, it can recur at any stage of our adult development. You may be in something of an identity crisis right now.

I’m inviting you this morning to find your identity in Jesus Christ. Your identity is not in your stuff or in what you do; your identity is rooted in what God says about you.

When we become followers of Jesus Christ, we are given a new identity. I no longer belong to myself; I now belong to Jesus Christ. The Heidelberg Catechism, written back in 1563AD, nails it:

“That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ, who at the...
cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.”

Our sense of self is determined solely by God’s valuing of us. Although sin distorts our God-given identity, God restores our sense of self through Jesus Christ. My life is lived in union with God and in relationship to Jesus Christ. I am not who other people say I am. I am not who I say I am. I am who God says I am.

What God declares at Jesus’ baptism, “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased,” is essentially what God pronounces over each of us. You are my beloved son. You are my beloved daughter. Beloved is such an old-fashioned word. It means “dearly loved.” We don’t hear this word or see it in print anymore except in obituaries. Obituary notices often characterize the deceased as survived by a beloved spouse or beloved children. Given what I know about dysfunctional families, could family life possibly be this idyllic?

We don’t forge our own identity; God bestows it on us. Yet there is something for us to do; we must regularly put on or appropriate this God-given identity. The image Paul utilizes in his letter to the Ephesians is one of taking off and putting on, much as we would a change of clothes. Christians are called to put on Christ like we would a new outfit or a new item of clothing.

Paul describes this putting off in verse 22: “You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupted by its deceitful desires.” Deceit serves as the antithesis to truth in Scripture. Satan is described in the Bible as “the deceiver.” He deceives us into thinking that we can build our lives on things like performance or reputation. We must not believe this lie. We believe the truth of who God says we are in Christ.

So, we put off all false identities. Paul instructs us, in verse 25, to “put on the new self created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” Believe the truth about who God says you are. Find your new identity in Jesus Christ.

What might this putting off and putting on look like in real life? Let’s imagine you have a long-held, deep-seated resentment toward someone who has wronged you. Someone said or did something to you that hurt you deeply. Over time this hurt
Forgiveness is hard...but resentment is harder still.

has burrowed deep into your soul and morphed into a stubborn grudge. Herod’s wife, Herodias, nursed a grudge against John the Baptist. It’s what led to John’s beheading. When we nurse a grudge, quite literally, heads begin to roll. Resentment has a domino effect. We want the person who caused pain in our life to hurt in the same way we have been hurt. We imagine saying or doing something that will inflict pain on that person. Some of you would go so far as to wish such people dead.

Jesus invites us to put off resentment and put on forgiveness. Sure, I’ll forgive this person if he or she apologizes and takes responsibility for the share of the blame. We prayed earlier in the Lord’s Prayer, “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” There’s nothing in this prayer about the other person first offering an apology before forgiveness is extended. Our forgiveness is unconditional in the same way God’s forgiveness of us is unconditional. Forgiveness is hard, impossibly hard at times, but resentment is harder still.

Let me offer a second example. Let’s suppose you like to be in control. Some of you with “Type A” personalities will identify with this struggle. You hate chaos and confusion. You love certainty. You do everything in your power to arrange your life to maintain control. You want to control everything in your environment much as someone would a TV remote or an Xbox controller.

Yet, as much as we try to execute control over our lives, control is illusory. We’re not actually in control. So what would it look like for you to put off your obsessive need for control and put on Christ? God is not a control freak. God’s control is intended to prosper us and not to harm us.

My hope today is that we will sink our roots deep into an identity forged in union with God and in relationship to Jesus Christ. Our mission this next year is “Becoming like Christ together for the world.” We want to become more like Christ. We want to become like Christ together. And we want to become like Christ together for the sake of others.

To help you establish this new identity, we urge you this fall to establish a spiritual growth plan. How can you arrange your life this next year to make Christ a priority? Bad habits may be holding you down or destructive attitudes are distorting your view of others. How will you arrange your life around the time-tested priorities of prayer, Scripture reading and relationships to become more like Christ together for the world? You may be hanging on to deeply-held resentments or have control issues. What do you need to put off and put on?

The book, Unbroken, is a true story about Louis
I am not what other people say I am. I am not who I say I am. I am who God says I am.

Zamperini. Louis was a track star at USC. At age 19, he came in 8th place in the 1500 meters in the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. He began training for the 1940 Olympics, which was cancelled as World War II intensified. Louis joined the Air Corps and trained as a pilot. He wasn’t religious. The only entry about religion in the middle portion of the book mentions that Louie was given a Bible before he left the states. He tried to read it to cope with his anxieties, but it made absolutely no sense to him and he abandoned it.

Louis’s plane was shot down over the Pacific. He survived 47 days in a life raft in shark-infested waters, enduring enemy planes strafing his raft. He was captured by the Japanese Imperial Army and spent over two years as a prisoner of war. He endured endless interrogations, cruel beatings and unimaginable abuse. Ultimately, he was liberated and given a hero’s welcome.

Louis married and began civilian life. Yet he continued to be haunted by bouts of anxiety, insomnia and painful flashbacks; what we would call today Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome. He exhibited rage for his captors and sought refuge in alcohol. After awhile, no one could reach Louis.

Louis’s wife, Cynthia, committed her life to Christ at a Billy Graham Crusade. She coaxed Louis to go with her. He finally relented and went under duress, but left before it was over. Cynthia begged Louis to go one more time. When Billy invited people to give their lives to Christ, Louis again got up to leave, but this time Graham directed people to remain in their seats until he was finished. What Billy said next bore deep into Louis’s heart. When Billy invited people forward to trust Christ, Louis was right there. He went home that night, opened his liquor cabinet and poured it all down the drain. He gathered up everything in the house that reminded him of his former life and threw it down the trash chute. In the morning, Louis felt cleansed. The resentment and rage bottled up inside him started to recede. It continued to recede. Louis has spent the last half of his life putting off the old self and putting on the new self.

I’m inviting you to do the same. Put off your old manner of life, your old self and put on Christ. Walk out of here today with a new identity. I am a child of God. I belong to Jesus Christ. I am not what other people say I am. I am not who I say I am. I am who God says I am.