

When I was a kid, I loved magic. I got a magic kit for a birthday present - it was a little black box that opened up and had a bunch of tricks you could do without much practice (I think I was 7 or 8, so this was about perfect.

[JR. Magic Tricks] But I got the magic bug and it stayed with me for a few years. I joined a magic club (because I desperately wanted to be cool and figured that was the safest route). I got a giant book filled with 500 magic tricks and set out to learn magic. I got pretty good at a couple of tricks.

You know what I learned about magic tricks? They're really hard. To get good at magic takes a *lot* of practice - practice I wasn't willing to put into becoming the next David Copperfield (obviously Chris Angel beat me to it). As with most things we want to do in life, magic takes mostly practice, practice, practice. It's no wonder there are so few truly great magicians.

This is not unlike faith. I think most of us approach spirituality the way we'd approach any other hobby or skill. If we want to really *wow* people, then we have to practice, practice, practice. The difference between the spiritual giants and the rest of us is how hard they work. They found a spiritual formula or secret trick that just works for them.

And if you want it to work for you too, well you only have to go to the Spirituality section at Barnes & Noble (okay let's be real - on Amazon) and you'll find plenty of self-help books on becoming a better person, better Christian, more mindful, more peaceful, more... spiritual. And a lot of those books will be more-or-less indistinguishable from the books in the actual self-help section (they'll just have slightly more spiritualized language).

The problem with trying to discern our spiritual calling the way we do other aspects of our lives is that the Spirit doesn't work according to our agenda or formulas. And believe it or not, that's actually great news. If we treat our spirituality the way we treat getting in shape or finishing that home improvement project or even learning magic tricks, we'll mostly be doomed to failure. Most of us will give up, leaving spirituality to the spiritual giants.

If in fact discovering our spiritual calling *isn't* about how hard we work, how smart or beautiful we are, if discovering our calling is about something else, if it's about the Spirit's work in our lives, then that means we can all discover our calling. Because it's more about the Spirit's work in our lives than what we bring to the table.

That matters because for the last several months, Catalyst has been on a new journey. It began with our 10-year celebration, when we began to dream about what God might be calling us to in the future. We confessed that we don't know the details, the specifics. So as we prepared for Christmas, we considered how we can begin a journey when we don't know exactly where we're going.

We saw that any journey begins with a desire to go, and as a Church, as individuals, we have discerned that gap. We want to be a church that creates spaces where everyone can embrace their God-given calling. An essential component of beginning a journey of discovery is attending to the clues we've discerned, the elements of our calling we know will be part of the end goal, even if we can't see that end yet.

One of those elements is calling - we want to create spaces where everyone can embrace their God-given calling. We know that whatever Catalyst will be in the future, a key element of our DNA will be that Catalyst people know what their calling is, and live into those vocations. So for the next several weeks, we're going to explore what calling is, and how we can begin to discern ours.

This is the season in the Church Year we call Epiphany - it's the time we celebrate that in the Christmas story, God was given to everyone in the world, not just a small, select group of people. During Epiphany, we celebrate that God calls everyone to be part of Jesus' new life. Every person is invited into what God is doing among us. Every person has a calling.

But learning to hear God's calling on our lives isn't about doing more stuff. Learning to hear God's calling is about... learning to listen. Hearing God's calling begins with listening to the Spirit.

Now I know that sounds all spiritual and nice (what did you expect at Church?), but I promise it's actually pretty frustrating. If hearing God's calling depends on learning to hear the Spirit, then that means we're sort of stuck. We have to wait for the Spirit to move, to speak, to call.

We can't actually *do*. We can't *act*. Because we're waiting on the Spirit. We're not in control. This is painful for us. It runs against the grain of our American DNA. We like the idea that we can fix our own problems. A little blood, sweat and tears, a little effort, we can find that bootstrap and pull ourselves up by 'em.

This is how it works - more or less - in the business world, in politics. We like to imagine our schools work that way. We can be forgiven for thinking Church works like that too.

But the hard truth of the Scriptures is that the Spirit does not work like we do. God's ways are not our ways. God doesn't think like we do - many theologians call God's way "upside down" because it's so contrary to the way we do things.

So if we want to discover our callings, we need to learn to listen, learn not to be in control. Learn to *react*, not just *act*. And if we can, we'll discover very good news indeed: that God is calling everyone. That you don't have to be a Spiritual giant to live out your God-given calling.

If you have a Bible, turn with me to Acts 8. The book of Acts traces the story of Jesus' followers in the wake of his resurrection. We watch as they try to make sense out of what God is doing in the world through Jesus, what God is calling *them* to do in response to Jesus' new life.

In this story, we first meet Philip, who might be my favorite. The disciples learn early on that one of the major features of this new life is that it's for *everyone*, not just a small circle of God's chosen people. Some of the disciples - like Peter - have a hard time with this. But not Philip. He goes out of his way to announce the good news to outsiders: HEY! God is welcoming you!

That's what's happening here: after Jesus' resurrection, the disciples had been meeting in Jerusalem, but the religious powers have forced them out of the city. So in these chapters, we watch as the Jesus story spreads outside the borders of Judea for the first time. And Philip goes to Samaria. Jews *hated* Samaritans. The racial tension between the two groups was sharp and powerful. If you wanted to find some outsiders in a hurry, the Samaritans were it, so it's no surprise Philip goes to them. Let's read, beginning in verse 4:

The believers who were scattered preached the Good News about Jesus wherever they went. Philip, for example, went to the city of Samaria and told the people there about the Messiah. Crowds listened intently to Philip because they were eager to hear his message and see the miraculous signs he did. Many evil spirits were cast out, screaming as they left their victims. And many who had been paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was great joy in that city.

A man named Simon had been a sorcerer there for many years, amazing the people of Samaria and claiming to be someone great. Everyone, from the least to the greatest, often spoke of him as "the Great One—the Power of God." They listened closely to him because for a long time he had astounded them with his magic.

Ooo! A magician! This is exciting!

But now the people believed Philip's message of Good News concerning the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ. As a result, many men and women were baptized. Then Simon himself believed and was baptized. He began following Philip wherever he went, and he was amazed by the signs and great miracles Philip performed.

When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that the people of Samaria had accepted God's message, they sent Peter and John there. As soon as they arrived, they prayed for these new believers to receive the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them, for they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John laid their hands upon these believers, and they received the Holy Spirit. -- Acts 8:4-17

In the early days of the Church, the Spirit only came on those on whom the apostles laid hands - it's why the laying-on of hands is still an important ritual in many Christian traditions today. In

Acts, the gift of the Spirit was accompanied by miracles - healings, speaking in foreign tongues and more.

So it's no surprise that Simon the Magician saw believers receiving the Holy Spirit and wanted in on the action. After all, his livelihood had been performing acts of power - people looked to him as a spiritual leader. Check out what he does next:

When Simon saw that the Spirit was given when the apostles laid their hands on people, he offered them money to buy this power. "Let me have this power, too," he exclaimed, "so that when I lay my hands on people, they will receive the Holy Spirit!"

But Peter replied, "May your money be destroyed with you for thinking God's gift can be bought! You can have no part in this, for your heart is not right with God. Repent of your wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive your evil thoughts, for I can see that you are full of bitter jealousy and are held captive by sin."

"Pray to the Lord for me," Simon exclaimed, "that these terrible things you've said won't happen to me!" After testifying and preaching the word of the Lord in Samaria, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem. And they stopped in many Samaritan villages along the way to preach the Good News. -- Acts 8:18-25

Simon tries to *buy* the power of the Spirit. That's not actually as strange as it might initially sound. Simon is a magician, and believe it or not, there were plenty of magicians running around in Jesus' day. They used amulets and spells to control spirits and deities. And they acquired those amulets and spells by... buying them.

Simon thinks the Holy Spirit is deity that can be controlled like all the others. He thinks it's business as usual. But the Spirit cannot be controlled. She is not at our beck and call.

Simon thinks he can buy power because he's *always* bought power. That's what magicians do. He thinks it's business as usual. But the power of the Spirit is a free gift from God, given to all who believe, not only those who can afford it.

Peter rebukes Simon and Simon hears. He believes, repents of his sin, his jealousy, his lust for position and begs Peter to pray for him.

We don't live in a world of magicians today, where we're tempted to think we can treat the Holy Spirit like a run-of-the-mill controllable spirit. But we do make the mistake of Simon in assuming God works like everything else in our world.

Have you ever felt like there's a Spiritual ladder to climb, that God won't be pleased with you until you work harder, pull yourself up by your spiritual bootstraps?

Have you ever felt that you won't be good enough until you find that magic formula - 5 easy steps to the life you've always wanted. 4 Habits of Highly Spiritual People. We are taught to *act* in times of uncertainty. To seize control, to be the captains of our own destiny.

It's no wonder we import that into our spirituality as well. Like Simon, we have difficulty believing God is as good as God claims to be. We live in a world where you have to earn what you get, where everything comes with strings attached, so we struggle to believe that the work of the Spirit in our lives is a *gift*. We live in a world of action, of go-getters and entrepreneurs and struggle to believe that *God* is accomplishing God's mission in the world. That we are to *react*, not act. We live in a world of divisions, of insiders and outsiders, us and them. We struggle to believe that *everyone* is welcomed, *everyone* is called.

Like Simon, we need to hear Peter's rebuke: our hearts are not right with God. We need to repent, to learn to listen for God's voice.

If you've ever thought, "God couldn't use me. I'm not good enough for a spiritual calling," that's sin. Because our world says people aren't good enough. God is different. God calls everyone and makes them good.

If you've ever wondered how much harder you have to try to before you "get it", if you're searching for the right formula, the right list to check to earn the Spirit's power, that's sin. Because our world is full of ladders to climb and boxes to check, privileges to earn. God is different. The Spirit's transforming power is a free gift that can't be earned or purchased.

If we want to be transformed, if we want access to the world-changing power that impresses even the most famous magicians, it begins with submitting to the Spirit. Acknowledging that my calling is not based on my abilities, my work ethic, my initiative. Embracing our God-given callings begins with admitting that our callings are just that - a call from God on us. We're not in control, God is. And if we want to *hear* God's call, we have to *listen* to God's call.

This is a lesson I constantly keep in front of myself. I *love* leadership books. I love talking with business people about vision and process and leadership development and organizational health and all that stuff that probably makes a bunch of you go cross-eyed. But I love it.

In leading a church - in leading Catalyst, I can easily forget that Catalyst is God's church, that our calling is a response to God's work. I can throw a vision statement up on the wall and start running ahead full-steam, working hard and using all the tips and tricks the business world has to offer.

And let me be honest: I'm a much better leader than I ever was a magician. I can build a pretty healthy, well-run organization. I see a lot of myself in Simon - I'm capable enough to impress a lot of people as a really Godly leader who is super spiritual.

All without involving the Holy Spirit.

Which is death to any church, any organization. I could be the best "leader" in the world, but without the Spirit breathing God's life into Catalyst, into *me* in my own life, I'm nothing more than a parlor magician, offering illusions and tricks instead of true transformation.

[[Spiritual Practices Guide](#)] I'm grateful for a community of people who reminds me daily to seek the Spirit first, to repent of my pride. And I'm grateful for spiritual practices like reading scripture, daily prayer, fasting and sabbath-keeping and giving that remind me on a daily or weekly basis to stop and listen for the Spirit.

Friends, there is much we can accomplish on our own energy, our own strength. Through a lot of grit, hard work and determination, we can get really good at getting by. But this is not life. It's to true life as illusions are to magic.

God is calling you to life - excessive, overflowing, abundant life. You don't have to earn, achieve or deserve to hear this calling. God *gives* it to you. To hear this calling begins with *listening* to the Spirit, being willing to follow the Spirit's call into an upside down world where *everyone* has a God-given calling.

Over the next month, we're going to learn what it means to hear that calling. We'll learn how our callings work together. We'll see how we need each other to fulfill our callings. And we'll see how love drives our callings - how learning to hear the Spirit begins with learning what we love.

Today, learning to hear begins with wanting to listen. Are you willing to create space in your life this week to *stop*, to acknowledge that you're not in control? Will you commit not to *acting*, but to *reacting* to the Spirit's call?

Maybe you need to adopt a spiritual practice this week - spend a few minutes each day reflecting on Scripture or in a prayer of examen. Institute a weekly fast or sabbath. Ask how you can begin giving.

Create space to stop. To listen.

What would your home look like if everyone were intimately connected to the life God is inviting you into? How many people in our community would be amazed at what is happening at Catalyst if each of us were living into that thing that gave us life and hope and made us excited to get out of bed in the morning?

How will you listen this week? How will you create space to hear your God-given call?

## **Communion Setup**

We can begin here, around the communion table. This table is a space God made for us that we would know beyond any question or doubt that we are loved and called to life. This table invites us back to the night Jesus was betrayed, to the meal he shared with his disciples. At that meal, he gave us bread, telling us it was his body, broken for us. He passed a cup of wine, calling it his blood, poured out as a new covenant, a new relationship between God and us.

God invites us to the table, into Jesus' death and resurrection. By approaching today, we walk with Jesus through his death into the new life beyond.

You don't have to be a member of Catalyst to receive communion today. If you are willing to listen for the Spirit's call, to respond to God's voice when you hear, then you're welcome to come today.