

[Texting Question] I want to know “What’s the bravest thing you’ve ever done?” Text your answer to the number on the screen and I will read some out loud.

I wouldn’t classify myself as a particularly brave person, although I do love a good adventure. I HAVE done that free-fall bungee swing thing. I occasionally stay up past my bedtime to finish a season of my favorite show on Netflix. I wore some pretty interesting pants in the 90s. All semi-courageous things to do. When I was younger, I actually dreamed of living with gorillas in the mist and helping out Jane Goodall and when I was over that, I thought I might be a National Geographic photographer. I ended up teaching 7th grade. Some have been known to classify that as brave. But overall, courage is not a strong suit of mine. I always wish I was more gutsy.

I looked up the definition of “courage.” It said it was “the ability to do something that frightens you.” It hit me that if you are choosing courage, you are also admitting that something is scary. You’re admitting that brave people are afraid. So the difference between someone who is labeled a scaredy-cat and someone who is labeled courageous is simply acting on the fear. It’s a choice to face that fear. Sometimes we equate courage with fearlessness. But that isn’t what this definition is saying. And, in fact, that choice is what MAKES them brave; it’s an important first step. The second definition of “courage” says it’s “the confidence to act in accordance with one’s beliefs.” A life of faith REQUIRES us to be brave. Without courage, we can’t become the people God is calling us to be.

If you grew up in church you might remember missionary books. These books were short, easy reads of the stories of Christian missionaries living in wonderfully exotic places and seamlessly using their courage everyday just to survive in a far off land. I always thought they sounded so cool. I wanted to go live in an awesome country so I could be a courageous Christian, too! The most courageous I could ever be in high school was to wear a shirt that had a pop-culture reference replaced with a clever Christian message. Take that you person challenging my Christian beliefs by mocking my clothing choices! Am I wearing a Coca-Cola shirt? (Jeezy shirt pic) Why, NO! It says JESUS is the real thing, dummy! Hashtag courage. And I would walk off to second period crafting a missionary book in my head where I was the lead character.

But still today in the news and on social media, we hear of Christians being lined up and shot. Martyred. Heartbreakingly, just a few weeks ago, Pakistani Christians were celebrating Easter in a park. They were targeted by an Isis suicide bomber. Hundreds were injured or killed, many were children as the man set himself up by the play area. Many adults and children were killed. Just not stuff we have to worry about here in good ol’ Rowlett, TX. I always wondered what I would be like that if thrown into those situations. If I was questioned about my faith, would I be ready to be a martyr? Or would I shrink at the thought of losing what I have...my family, my friends, my life, my stuff. I feel like a bad Christian because I am pretty sure I could never be that brave.

I mean God called us to love one another. And THAT, my friend, is not always easy. LOVE requires a lot of courage. Sometimes it’s the courage to say, “I’m sorry” when you were wrong. Or using some of your precious time to help someone in need. Or sticking it out with a spouse when you just feel like throwing in the towel. Or eating with someone who needs a friend. Or simply getting up off the couch and getting a job. But we can’t risk that...we’ve been there before and the courage we used wasn’t worth it. .

We hear “have courage” and we think, “Let’s go out and fight everyone who is acting against what we believe in! Put on that breastplate of righteousness, pick up our swords of the Spirit and FIGHT! We must find every way that Christianity is being mocked or destroyed and have the courage to stand against those stripping it from our grasps. (THIS. IS. CATALYST!!! meme with Gerard Butler’s screaming face from the 300.) It must be my job to act against each force that attacks us within politics or social media or even at work.”

But that’s actually not the scariest battle Christians have to fight. What takes the most courage is LOVE.

Faith requires us to have the courage to love well and to allow ourselves to be loved. The courage it takes to face ourselves, to be honest about how we need healing, and to allow God to transform us is often much greater than the courage to face others. But this is what Jesus is calling us to.

[Scripture Slide] I want you to read some scriptures with me today. The first one is located in Revelation 21, verses 1-8. If you don’t have a Bible there are a few in the back. You can grab one and feel free to keep it, it’s yours. If you’re using that Bible today’s scripture can be found on page ###.

Revelation is a letter written to 7 churches in the Roman province of Asia (modern-day Turkey). These churches were all struggling with how to be faithful in a faithless world. And several of them had decided to stand against the culture, to be ruthless in their opposition to the outside world.

But God’s answer for them throughout the book has not been to fight back, but rather to remain faithful to Jesus. To continue to be the people of God in the world, no matter how difficult that may be. And in fact, many Christians in the book *have* lost faith. The fight got too hard, the pressure got too great and they cracked. They fell away. They compromised. They didn’t have the courage to make it to the end.

Which is where we are now. This is the final scene in the book. God has reclaimed the world, evil and injustice and Death have been defeated once and for all, and this is what happens next:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, “Look, God’s home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.”

And the one sitting on the throne said, “Look, I am making everything new!” And then he said to me, “Write this down, for what I tell you is trustworthy and true.” And he also said, “It is finished! I am the Alpha and the Omega—the Beginning and the End. To all who are thirsty I will give freely from the springs of the water of life. All who are victorious will inherit all these blessings, and I will be their God, and they will be my children.

“But cowards, unbelievers, the corrupt, murderers, the immoral, those who practice witchcraft, idol worshipers, and all liars—their fate is in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.” - Revelation 21, verses 1-8

God has created a city for us out of love, a beautiful place where He has made everything new, a culmination of His original plan, where heaven and earth meet and God is WITH us. And I am pretty sure that he meant everything...not just healing the earth and sky and sea, but our hearts and bodies and relationships and institutions and injustices and cultures....as well. But that is exactly what we need if we are going to have the inner resolve to live a courageous life-what God has called us to live.

Did you notice that there are people who are not included in this city? It's not that they were excluded because clearly the one seated on the throne said that all who are thirsty He will give freely from the springs of the water of life. That begs the question: If *anyone* is welcome, then why is there anyone left outside the city?

Did you notice who's listed first among the outsiders? The *cowardly*. How interesting. The first folks to head to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. So you're telling me that the people who don't even make it into the Holy City are the people who weren't BRAVE enough? What does that even mean? Without that word in there, it sounds like a call to don a super suit. If you brush past that word, “cowardly,” it sounds pretty much like an old school “burn in hell” message. Or, if I don't work really hard, he's going to send me “down there.” I don't want to be told that God is throwing me into a fiery lake of burning sulfur. That contradicts the God of love I have heard so much about!

Let me be clear here: we've got Hell backwards. We think Hell is a place God loves to send people who don't measure up. But God doesn't want anyone to end up apart from him - that's the whole point of the book of Revelation and really the whole Bible. As C. S. Lewis observed in THE GREAT DIVORCE, “None are in Hell but they that choose it.”

Friends, “outside the city” is where we choose when we are not *brave enough* to become the people God is calling us to become. God doesn't SEND people to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. (I wish my mic would echo every time I said that.) God says that everyone may drink of this living water, but you must be willing to come to the fountain.

But it's not a literal fountain. So what do we need to be brave enough to do?

[Scripture Slide 2] Well, luckily we have a story of some guys who were cowards. If you would look back to your Bible to John 13, verses 31-35. This can be found on page ###. In John's gospel, Jesus talks a lot about the hour of his “glory”, and he's always talking about his crucifixion. On the Cross, Jesus' divinity is most fully on display (remember - Jesus is the slaughtered Lamb!). On the night before his crucifixion, Jesus gathered with his most faithful friends, his disciples - the very men who would abandon him a few hours from now when he was betrayed. This passage is a small piece of his parting address. Let's read what he told them.

As soon as Judas left the room, Jesus said, “The time has come for the Son of Man to enter into his glory, and God will be glorified because of him. And since God receives glory because of the Son, he will give his own glory to the Son, and he will do so at once. Dear children, I will be with you only a little longer. And as I told the Jewish leaders, you will

search for me, but you can't come where I am going. So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples." - John 13, verses 31-35

He warns the disciples that they can't go where He is going (to the cross). He's right - only a few short hours later, they abandon Him, and worse, betray Him. But their stories don't end there. If we continue to read, we find that after Jesus is raised from the dead, they are transformed by the Holy Spirit. They are made new. And Jesus' promise - that they will be known as a people of LOVE - comes true.

The disciples weren't ready to follow Jesus. *They didn't have the courage.* Because they hadn't been transformed, they couldn't love God and they couldn't love each other. But Jesus' resurrection gives them the courage to love well. And they become unstoppable.

The New Testament includes story after story of Jesus' friends going out into the world with the sole purpose of spreading God's love to those who were unloveable. To those who needed the good news that having the courage to love each other could transform them. Just like Jesus said. Just as He loved them. And it SURE did prove to the world that they were running the race to the finish line. Love teaches us how to die with Jesus...and THAT takes a lot of courage. Love is the key to fitting in God's new world that John wrote about in Revelation. Love makes all things new. Love takes a lot of courage.

I know what some of you are thinking. You're thinking love is the easy stuff. It's rainbows and puppies unicorns and mushy stuff. Being loved and loving others makes your heart leap through fluffy clouds of baby laughter. It's not hard. It doesn't take courage to love people. You just do it!

But we know Love is only easy in Disney movies. Love is a risk. It is difficult. Loving others...especially those who don't make your heart leap...is hard. Being a friend to someone because they need it and not just to benefit YOUR needs takes a lot of courage. Loving yourself is hard, too. We do a lot of talking down to ourselves. At least I do. I think I'm not loveable enough even when God says I am. And if we don't love ourselves enough, we do severe damage to those relationships that mean the most. Within this last year I witnessed a beautiful thing. I listened to a group of people sitting around and sharing things they didn't like about themselves. Some of the people I thought were the most confident, struggled the most with loving pieces of themselves. The beauty came as the conversation progressed and healing was found through the simple suggestion of a person in that group to share things everyone loved about each other. Sometimes we can learn to love ourselves when we see what others see.

Loving God is hard, too. Sounds silly to say out loud. How could we not love a Father who loves us unconditionally? But at times we are so fearful of what simply living will bring rather than we lose the courage to love God and trust in His care.

But LOVE. TRANSFORMS us. Not working harder. Not doing more. Not checking boxes. The courage to love heals us and restores us so we are prepared to live in God's new world, this new city he created. All because God IS love.

A few years back I was introduced by my friend to a man named Chris Field. (Ghanian fishermen) He is an amazing man who started The Mercy Project. During a trip to Ghana, Africa, he encountered many children who were slaves. His heart was instantly broken. He decided he wanted to save every single one of the estimated 7,000 children enslaved in the fishing industry on Lake Volta in Ghana. Instead of simply buying children out of slavery, because he knew the men would just keep finding other children, his teams build relationships with them and teach them how to implement the sustainable idea of aquaculture-raising fish in cages- which results in more fish to sell without the child labor. The trafficked children are then rehabilitated and families are searched for and located while the men learn how to use aquaculture instead of enslaved children.

When I thought about having courage, and more importantly, the courage to love, my mind was drawn to this story over and over. These men, some who were child slaves themselves, continued down the path of human trafficking because for them, it was the easy way. It was just how they'd always done things. And in steps Mercy Project with its new ideas, wanting to change it all. What courage it must take to admit that your livelihood, the one thing you've known everyday, is wrong. How could they possibly change their hearts to love these slaves they were using, forgive and love themselves, and then join a relationship with our loving God? But Chris and Mercy Project were always there, urging them to implement the sustainable practice, to let the children go back to their parents. And you know what? It works. Over and over, these men who keep these young children as slaves are releasing them and going down the difficult path of restoration within their souls and learning to be a new person occupationally and in their hearts. There are many hours of inviting these Mercy Project strangers into their homes, sitting beneath a mango tree together, (the prime meeting spot in a village), discussing the new ways, and finally deciding that Mercy Project's ideas are solid. The slave owners know the difficult path they will have to walk, but it is a courageous walk forward and they know it will be worth it.

Just like these villagers who were practicing human trafficking, we can't succumb to a safe faith, the easy way, the one in which we are fearful of the changes that must be made. This faith will not transform us. This type of faith will leave us outside the city. Instead we must risk love. We can't just trust in the "Jesus sprinkle" to work its magic. Because He isn't an additive. We can't just add Him to the top of our pain or confusion or fear and expect a change. We must have the courage to, as the definition said, "act in the accordance with our beliefs." We must choose to be ready to live the life to which God is calling us. It's the courage to be made whole and new by God. We must have the courage to continue on even when it's hard and when we don't really know how we can ever make the change. We must not let the fear keep us from finishing the race. For when we courageously step forward in our faith, we allow God to make us new. We become a beacon of hope and change in the world around us.

We need to know what that looks like. Who are we at Catalyst afraid to love? People who look different? Who seem to have more than we do? Less? Maybe people who don't follow the rules just right? Maybe people who post weird stuff on social media? What would it look like for Catalyst to have courage when it came to loving these people? God has called us to have the courage to love. He sent His Spirit to empower us with courage. We don't have to submit to legalism any longer. In the Spirit we find the power to have courage to love others. This is what God does IN US when we are open to the Spirit. This is good news.

Communion Set Up

We find courage at this table. Here we are invited back to that night before Jesus was killed, when he was gathered with all those who would so soon abandon him. Even knowing that, Jesus shared a meal with them. At that meal, he offered them bread as his body, broken for them, for their sin, for their cowardice. Later in the meal, he passed a cup of wine that was his blood, poured out as a new covenant, a new relationship between God and humanity. The blood of the slaughtered lamb. Blood that would soon transform all these cowards into a world-changing church.

We approach the table as a people who needs the courage to live in God's world, the courage to be transformed by God's love into a people of fearless love. We approach as a people in need of grace, a people hungry for life, for hope.

You don't have to be a member of Catalyst to receive Communion today. If you want the courage to be transformed, if you're willing to open yourself to the work of the Spirit who is making all things new, then you're welcome to come forward. If you're thirsty, the One seated on the Throne says, "Come and drink".

We are going to end with a prayer of Examen. I will ask you four questions, and give you space to reflect prayerfully on each one. Then I will close us with a corporate prayer, and as you're ready, you're welcome to come forward to receive Communion.

1. Who have you loved well this week?
2. Who are you afraid to love?
3. How can you risk in love this week?
4. What does it look like for you to run the race this week?

Let's pray...

God, our creator and the one seated on the throne of the universe,

Thank you for the good news we have heard today, for this powerful picture of your will for our world. We have seen today that you do not plan to abandon us even to our Sin, that you do not wish to send us to Hell. You want to live with us, as our God. you want to transform us from death to life. Thank you for offering us the waters of life which are your Holy Spirit. Thank you for giving us freely the same power that raised your son Jesus from the dead that we too might be made new.

We approach your table this morning as a people who needs courage to love and to be loved. As we come, may these wafers and juice be transformed into a spiritual food. May we discover the grace we need to risk love, risk life, risk transformation.

We offer these prayers and approach your table in the name of your son Jesus.