

[Picture of Sweeney family] Good morning! My name is Sue Sweeney and I'm part of the teaching team at Catalyst. Thank you for spending time with us today.

My husband, Jeff, and I have been coming to Catalyst church for a while...about 8 years. We have two daughters; Stella who is 5 and Clara who is 2 ½. So, that's two little girls under the age of six in my household. I might have seen the movie *Frozen* a few times...actually, it feels like a few HUNDRED times. Technically, I've probably *heard* the movie tons of times.

[Movie Poster] So, in case some of you haven't seen or heard the movie *Frozen* as many times as I've had the privilege to, I'll let you know it begins in a vaguely Scandinavian kingdom called Arendelle, where two princesses, Elsa and Anna live. Elsa has special powers- she shoots ice out of her hands, which is mostly pretty cool, but occasionally a bit scary, so she keeps it a secret from everyone, including her sister. Eventually, Elsa lets her guard down a little, and her powers get out of control. Hurt and afraid, she flees and storms up a mountain where alone and free in her own ice castle she can now release her special powers without consequence...you know, really *let it go*. But, in her wake, her magic casts an eternal winter over the land, slowly freezing the kingdom to death.

Anna sets out to rescue her sister Elsa and ultimately attempts to lay down her life for her sister, saving the kingdom. *Frozen's* message says that "true love" isn't just about marrying your prince or princess, it's about family, sisterhood, and friendship.

You and I don't have special icy powers...that we know of, but I'm sure we can identify a little with Queen Elsa in this story. Sometimes we put ourselves out there and let our guards down a little, only to get burned. Maybe you've decided that isolating yourself is the way to prevent being hurt again. Elsa created an ice castle to shield herself from anyone who might try to find her. You know, we too can build "ice castles" of our own to separate and protect ourselves. Maybe some of us play video games or stare at our phone as a way to tune out other people? Or we create a perfect version of ourselves through social media or in daily interactions, to keep others at arm's reach. Maybe you just try to live your life without involving a lot of other people. You go to work, keep your head down, and go home to your pets or your family all while avoiding other people who might make your life more complicated?

How much do we really need other people?

The movie *Frozen* says we do. Elsa discovers that her isolation actually becomes toxic to herself and others. We see that in her haste to scurry up the mountain to hide, she inadvertently sets off that eternal winter over the whole kingdom.

When we find ourselves in conflict with others, out of fear, we choose to separate ourselves as a way to avoid the pain and risk of hurting or being hurt. But, like Elsa, instead of staying and doing the hard work of loving others and working through the challenges of our relationships, we escape and just leave everyone else behind to freeze to death.

Is this us living our best lives?

In *Frozen*, The spell is eventually broken, thanks to Elsa's sister's sacrifice- an act of true love. We tend to reduce love to marital relationships. You know, finding your prince or princess and living happily ever after, but Elsa finds healing for her fear in her relationship with her sister.

The Good News is, we can also find healing in our relationships with others. This is how we experience the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives - through authentic and true community. Yes, it is risky, but we have to be vulnerable. The scriptures agree with this message in *Frozen*. We do need other people. We are created for community. It's the way God makes our love perfect.

[Scripture Slide] Members of the early church struggled with identifying what a relationship with God looks like. They also struggled in navigating their relationships with each other. If you have your Bible with you this morning, let's look at **1 John 4:11-19** together. If you've picked up one of our Bibles in the back, we're on page ###. If you don't have a Bible of your own, you're welcome to keep that one.

Some of you may wonder what loving others has to do with loving God. Some of you might say, "Look, me and God are FINE." I pray, I read the Bible. I go to church to worship and grow closer to God. Yeah, there are other people who are also here at church, but what's most important is my relationship with God, not with these other people." In scripture we see that without living in community, we cannot really know God. Community PERFECTS God's love in us. Love for God and love for others cannot be separated.

The author of 1 John writes,

Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us.

What is "perfect love"? Does it mean we're supposed to be perfect for God? When we think of "perfect" in our society today, we say it's something without flaw or defect. So, does God punish us when we're...defective? This fear of what might happen to us if we break the rules or step out of line is how some of us were brought up to understand how God works. That going to church and having a relationship with God is comprised mostly of organizing everything we do into a two-column chart of "do's and don'ts". The goal being to reach the end of our lives having completed most of the "do's" and a maybe just a couple of the "don'ts." If we do that, then we won't have to fear God's judgement.

This is a legalistic approach toward religion and it has a way of separating people from one another. It doesn't create authentic relationships, it destroys them. It's particularly toxic when you start making decisions about what other people are doing, taking care of their two-column charts for them and judging their activities as "do's" and "don'ts". Especially if you haven't done the hard work of building authentic relationships first.

The truth is that God loves us all of us all the time, even with our flaws. The way the word "perfect" was used in the ancient Greek of 1 John translates a little differently into our language today.. What the author is saying here in the text is that "perfect" actually means finished or

completed, not flawless. It is the Holy Spirit who makes our love perfect. The Holy Spirit makes our love complete.

So, how is our love completed?

In verse 15, we also see a translation of the Greek word, *meno*, which means to abide, remain, or endure. God abides in us as we abide in each other. God remains in us as we remain one another. God endures in us as we endure one another. You don't have to keep track of a two-column chart of "do's and don'ts" to earn God's love. You already have it. Having a perfect or complete love means remaining in community with God and each other, even when it's difficult.

How do we know what this abiding and remaining love looks like? In our movie, Elsa finds healing in her relationship with her sister. Despite the risk, Anna pursues Elsa and ultimately attempts to sacrifice her own life to save her sister and friends. In this verse, we're reminded of the death and resurrection of Jesus. The author of John 15:13 writes,

**There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends.**

I'm not saying you have to put yourself in harm's way every day for the sake of your family and friends. Honestly, wouldn't most people do that anyway? That's called being "a hero." But, we CAN take a risk and love others a little better. Love is about giving of yourself, despite the risk you might get hurt.

God asks us to die to ourselves. This kind of love is not sentimental OR self-serving. Building authentic relationships with each other can only happen if we love others first. We have our immediate families and close friends and we should certainly love them, but it's not just about me and mine and you and yours. It's about all of us. It's everyone. The church is our spiritual family. Our relationship with God is not just a direct line between you and God, it's also the lines connecting you and me and everyone else at Catalyst and everyone outside the walls of this building, including and ESPECIALLY the people you disagree with. The people who don't see the world the way you do. It's remaining and abiding with all of these people- putting their good above your own.

Abiding and remaining in community with others means engaging in conflict when we would rather run from it.

I'm not a confrontational person, so asking me to engage in conflict makes me feel all sweaty and nervous, but the truth is, conflict is not inherently bad. It's actually a necessary part of building true community. To expect to have a relationship with someone- a coworker, a friend, a parent, a spouse, a son or daughter and see eye-to-eye on everything? That's not very likely. Having a deep and meaningful relationship with someone takes learning how to work through conflict successfully and that can only come from dying to ourselves- laying down our own lives for the lives of others.

In the field of Educational Leadership, we discuss the work of American psychiatrist and best-selling author, Dr. M. Scott Peck and his "Stages of Community." If we choose to escape our problems instead of engaging with others and working things out, there are destructive consequences. According to Dr. Peck, there are four stages people move through as they go from being strangers to developing an authentic and true community.

[Pic of C-Group] For example, my family is part of a C-group here at Catalyst. We meet once a week during the school year in one of our homes, usually Debbie and Casey Reese's house. We all bring food. We eat together. We get caught up on how everyone's week is going and then we sit in a circle in the living room and talk about what we're learning on Sunday mornings and what it means for our lives. At the beginning we were all especially polite to one another. You know, we kept our opinions to ourselves and we were careful not to ruffle anyone's feathers.

[Illustrate these stages] Dr. Peck calls this the Pseudo-Community. It's the first stage. as people get to know one another, they try very hard to avoid conflict altogether. You know, for a while, everyone plays "nicey-nicey". You may think some things about the other people in the group, but you don't say them out loud. The goal in this stage is to keep things copacetic. It's a "Pseudo-Community" because it feels like people are functioning together well, but the relationships are superficial. Conflict is brewing underneath the surface.

The next stage after Pseudo-Community is "Chaos." In any group of people, there's always someone who decides they've had enough and they're going to do something about it. The conflict finally rises to the surface. When handled well, the group can move forward to a better place, but this doesn't happen as often as it should. Usually, pride gets in the way and people neglect the hard work of loving others. Things get aggressive, fights break out or some in the group respond passive aggressively and retreat to their ice castles of isolation, like Elsa.

Eventually, people get tired of the chaos and try to suck it up and move on without really dealing with the underlying issues. As a result, group returns to the Pseudo-community stage. But, it's only a matter of time until someone can't take it anymore again and the whole thing erupts into another round of chaos.

It becomes a vicious cycle - this back and forth between pseudo-community and chaos and pseudo-community and then chaos again and it eventually leads to BURNOUT. It becomes a means by which we destroy ourselves and each other. it's not a place where we want to get stuck, but we find ourselves there anyway.

Dr. Peck advises groups to move on to a 3rd stage, called "Emptiness" in order to break out of the Burnout Cycle. People have to be encouraged to suspend their judgement and criticism long enough to let others explain what they are struggling with. People empty their biases, prejudices and presuppositions about one another and they listen carefully and completely. When they do that, they can reach the 4th and final stage, True Community.

In my C-group, there have been a couple weeks when we've met this year where you could say we ended up in that second stage of Chaos. Some of us couldn't hold back any longer and we started to really get into it. We've had some heated exchanges in each other's living rooms and some awkward moments. I'm telling you, looking back on this year, THAT is when things really started to get good. Some of us, with a little encouragement, finally talked about what was really on our hearts and minds and even though we didn't all agree- even though we were all a little stressed out while it was happening, it was authentic and necessary. We're into that 3rd stage of emptying. We're developing new understandings and ultimately, learning how to love each other completely- despite our differences and... also because of our differences. I know we're setting a precedent in our C-group that we can talk about the hard stuff and still all walk out the door at the end of the night as friends. It's not about "agreeing to disagree" or thinking "I'm wrong and you're right." Our relationships are going to be deeper than that. We're saying now,

I'm learning from you and you're learning from me and we know we all have a long way to go, but we're growing together. We're becoming a True Community.

Abiding and remaining in love is difficult. It's so much easier to withdraw quietly or cut people off.

But the Good News is that God is already abiding and remaining and enduring in us and with us. The Holy Spirit gives us courage and helps us learn what it means to be loved completely and to love others completely and since God loves us, we also ought to love each other.

We can love without limits.

What we're asking you today is to consider what your 'next right step' might be as you think about how you can grow in your understanding of how God abides in you and you abide in others. This seems especially challenging during this heated election season, but what would it mean this week to take a risk and love someone a little better? What are the little ways in which you can lay down your life? A few weeks ago here at Catalyst, Amy Dennis talked to us about giving people the gift of going second. You can initiate the "emptying" stage in your relationships by first explaining what you are struggling with. It makes it easier for the other person to share when you take the first step in being vulnerable.

Where can you make a move this week for the sake of someone else? Maybe it's sending a text to someone you've been avoiding and just asking them how they are doing. If you see something on social media that makes you angry, take a moment before you fire off in the comments and think, "is what I wanna say going to strengthen this relationship or chip away at it? The goal is that every conversation and interaction should serve to build up a relationship, not slowly dismantle it.

At Catalyst, we have three levels in which you can build relationships with your spiritual family. Our Sunday morning worship time is a great way to get started, but it's a larger group of us and sometimes our interactions are a bit shallow because that's sort of the nature of things when you're with a lot of people for a short amount of time. C-groups can help you deepen your relationships with those you go to church with and it helps you really practice this remaining and abiding love because it's a smaller group of people for you to interact with. We also have Life Transformation Groups, or LTGs which are very small, usually about three people who meet together on a regular basis for an hour or two.

So, Catalyst, what would it look like for you to be in deep relationships? To be known fully, and loved for who you are, without having to hide anything? What if you could just... LET IT GO...and be loved as you love?

**[Communion Slide]** Authentic community at Catalyst flows from this communion table. This table invites us back to the meal Jesus shared with his followers the night before he was killed. At that meal, he broke bread as his body, broken for us. He passed a cup of wine as his blood poured out as a new covenant between us and God.

Jesus demonstrated that he loves us by laying down his life for us. He went first, so we can follow him. By participating in this meal today, we receive the self-giving love that transforms us into givers. We leave as a people free to lay down our lives for the good of others.

You don't have to be a member of Catalyst to receive communion. If you're willing to receive God's love, to be transformed into a risky, self-giving lover like God is, then you're welcome to come forward.

Before we pray, I'm going to lead you in a Prayer of Examen. I'll ask four questions and give you space to reflect prayerfully on them, then I'll pray and as you're ready you're welcome to come forward.

1. In the last week, how have you risked being vulnerable or experiencing conflict for the sake of love?
2. In the last week, how have you pulled back from relationships with others, in an effort to avoid being vulnerable or experiencing conflict?
3. In the next week, where will you be tempted to avoid being vulnerable and experiencing conflict?
4. In the next week, how can you choose to risk being vulnerable and experiencing conflict for the sake of love?

### **Prayer of Consecration**

God, we approach your table today as recipients of your infinite, beautiful, self-giving love. You loved us enough to give up your position in Heaven, to risk life as one of us, even knowing that we would take your life from you. You gave us everything, that we might be transformed into people who faithfully bear your image in our world.

As we approach your table today, may these wafers and juice become a spiritual food for us. May the grace we receive transform us into people who are not afraid to risk for the sake of love. As we risk, we trust your Holy Spirit to bind us together as one body, that we might be a people of love who bear witness to your love through our words and actions to the world around us.

We offer these prayers and approach your table today in the name of your Son, Jesus.