

Welcome

Good morning, y'all! My name is Josh. My wife Lynn and I have been at Catalyst for about four years now and I am finally mustering up the courage to do what God has laid on my heart to do. So, feel free to heckle and yell. It'll make me feel more at home.

Speaking of which, I know that some of us have gotten in a yelling match or two with family over some stupid stuff. For my wife and I? It was a shouting match over dishes that ended in me yelling that she didn't really love me, and her yelling back, "You're acting like my 5-year-old sister!" Yeah... not a real proud moment there. So, it's not too surprising that churches have argued or even split over some pretty ridiculous stuff. How ridiculous? Here's a few:

1. **Argument over the appropriate length of the worship pastor's beard**
2. **A dispute over whether the worship leader should have his shoes on during the service**
3. **A dispute in the church because the Lord's Supper had cran-grape juice instead of plain grape juice**
4. **Two different churches reported fights over the type of coffee. In one of the churches, they moved from Folgers to a stronger Starbucks brand. In the other church, they simply moved to a stronger blend. Members left the church in the latter example.**
5. **Some church members left the church because one church member hid the vacuum cleaner from them. It resulted in a major fight and split.**

These are downright ridiculous (and hopefully we don't have any fights over beard length here). But the thing to remember is that there's *always* a deeper issue. The vacuum fight wasn't really about the vacuum. There was an issue underneath that issue that went unaddressed for a long time. Our inability to identify and engage these deeper issues is a real problem: it's safe to say the Church, the body of Christ, is KNOWN for our arguing and in-fighting. And our arguments aren't always about silly things. Sometimes it's over a core issue that really hits home with us. I have seen churches split over homosexuality, finances, and alcohol.

This morning, I'd like to propose to you that making our conflicts about determining who is right and who is wrong is missing the point. The goal of our faith has never being 'being the most right'. It's always been about connecting people to Jesus. Now, I am not saying that these issues should be brushed under the rug. When I say unity, please don't equate that with uniformity. We are all individuals crafted by God with our own life experiences. Because of this, there are always going to be disagreements. The truth is that these issues don't have to simmer until they boil over into fights. And when those fights do happen, it doesn't have to mean the end of relationships. Our deep lack of unity over both the trivial and the important has hurt us, Christ's image, and our witness. When we already have a foundation of Unity, we actually invite people into a deeper relationship with both God and us!

Today is about refusing to be morality police, always looking at each other and constantly judging and evaluating. Because man, is that exhausting. Instead, today is about committing together to

look to Jesus, the one at the center of our common faith. So let's sing together and direct our love, our worship, and our attention to him!

Message

In the Church calendar, this is the season of Epiphany. As the season following Christmas, Epiphany celebrates God being revealed not just to a select chosen few, but to the whole world. This year, our Epiphany series is called, "Ask Better Questions."

During this series, we're going to be reading the letter the Apostle Paul wrote to the church he planted in Corinth. This letter is responding to questions they raised. Their questions are going to be specifically about how to understand God working in their lives. In other words, what does it mean to say that God is "FOR the ENTIRE WORLD?" And when they're asking those questions, they're really asking, "What does it mean to say that God is for ME?" "What does God mean by, 'for MY WORLD?'"

So, one of my favorite things about the Bible is that it's an onion. You know - it has layers. And, just like an onion, the farther down through the layers, the better it gets. Well, if you like onions, that is.

This book and chapter have several things going on. The broader context is that the church of Corinth is struggling with a whole host of conflicts going on at the same time. That's because it's filled with incredibly diverse people at all levels of spiritual maturity. Corinth was THE major trade city in that area of the Mediterranean. (Map picture). Its isthmus is located smack dab in-between two land masses and two bodies of water. So, naturally, thousands of people, tons of goods, and dozens of varying cultures passed through this one city. I'd say it's safe to say that some conflict is to be expected. The Corinthian Christians were diverse, and that caused conflict. When they couldn't resolve several conflicts, they wrote a letter to Paul asking for his wisdom and guidance. I'm going to go out on a limb and say these conflicts probably didn't catch Paul off-guard either.

One of the issues the Corinthians disagreed about was whether it was okay to eat meat that has been sacrificed to idols. If you're anything like me, then you probably haven't ever taken part in an animal sacrifice. Well, unless you count eating at the Salt Lick (which is, in fact, blessed by God.) But what was the big deal with meat offered to a pagan god vs. Yahweh? The issue was that many Christians believed: 1. That the meat would be considered "unclean," and 2. That it was, in a way, tacit approval of idol worship.

Now, the more mature believers understood that those fake idols were just that. The idols were no more real gods than this stand is. So, with this understanding, they were eating anything and everything, which caused the others to doubt their faith. Because why would any true follower of Christ endorse idol worship? Understanding and seeing both sides of the issue, Paul was able to write an incredibly wise and unifying response.

He answered the question in Chapter 8 this way:

So, what about eating meat that has been offered to idols? Well, we all know that an idol is not really a god and that there is only one God.⁵ There may be so-called gods both in heaven and on earth, and some people actually worship many gods and many lords. ⁶ But for us, There is one God, the Father,

by whom all things were created,
and for whom we live.
And there is one Lord, Jesus Christ,
through whom all things were created,
and through whom we live.

However, not all believers know this. Some are accustomed to thinking of idols as being real, so when they eat food that has been offered to idols, they think of it as the worship of real gods, and their weak consciences are violated. It's true that we can't win God's approval by what we eat. We don't lose anything if we don't eat it, and we don't gain anything if we do.

But you must be careful so that your freedom does not cause others with a weaker conscience to stumble. -- 1 Corinthians 8:4-9

What he's saying is that even though all this meat is offered to idols, it doesn't really matter. Why? Because there is only one true God. And Paul is clearly coming out on the side of the stronger believers. Let's just pause for a second and think of the context here: Paul's letters were read OUT LOUD with the entire church present. So that means that the ones he called "weak" were sitting right next to those he called "strong." Yikes! How would you feel if you were the weak one? Or maybe the strong one? Yet, though Paul has chosen a side, they are not off the hook. We need to take into account whether or not the exercising of our freedom will cause the weaker to stumble.

Seems straight forward, right? It is, but Paul pushes the issue further where we pick up in chapter 9. The Corinthians had been asking, "Can we eat meat sacrificed to idols?" or for us, it might be, "Is it OK to drink alcohol?" When we compare idol meat to our issue of alcohol nowadays, you can get a better sense of gravity of the issue. For some, alcohol is not a big deal because they drink it in moderation with little issue. Whereas, for others, it is a deeply damaging substance that has cause years of pain and heartache in their lives and the lives of ones they love. The ones who drink aren't a bunch of drunkards and the sober ones aren't a bunch of lame prudes. There are good reasons why each side holds to its beliefs. But really though, underneath those questions lies this one: "Is my way the right way? Because I really think it is." And for the Corinthians, being right meant they could do what they wanted. Being right (about the issue) gave them the right to eat meat (or not eat it, depending on their position).

We're the same way. We want faith to be about who is right and who is wrong. Paul wants more from us. He wants us to peel back another layer. To ask the deeper question. Let's read:

19 Even though I am a free man with no master, I have become a slave to all people to bring many to Christ. 20 When I was with the Jews, I lived like a Jew to bring the Jews to Christ. When I was with those who follow the Jewish law, I too lived under that law. Even though I am not subject to the law, I did this so I could bring to Christ those who are under the law. 21 When I am with the Gentiles who do not follow the Jewish law, [a] I too live apart from that law so I can bring them to Christ. But I do not ignore the law of God; I obey the law of Christ.

22 When I am with those who are weak, I share their weakness, for I want to bring the weak to Christ. Yes, I try to find common ground with everyone, doing everything I can to save some. 23 I do everything to spread the Good News and share in its blessings. -- 1 Corinthians 9:16-23

Paul says “Hey, guys! You’re missing the whole point!” He would do just about anything to bring someone to Jesus. Asking, “Am I right?” is the wrong question. The question should be, “Am I loving the person on the other side?” Jesus didn’t say, “Go and tell everyone what they are doing wrong, and how to be more like you!” He said, “Go and spread the good news. The news that the God of the universe wants a relationship with all!”

Paul explains that his freedom allows him to become all things to all people... that he is not really bound by social rules, or people’s expectations. He can go hang out at a bar Saturday night and to go to church on Sunday morning. SO! That means we as Christians are free to whatever we want, whenever we want! Which is awesome because I’m planning a huge rave at my house this weekend. <kidding>

If THAT was our first reaction to what Paul said, then it reveals the spiritual immaturity in us. It shows that our first instinct when we have freedom is that of a teenager whose parents go away for a weekend. That we seek to fulfill our selfish (and often sinful) desires rather than the purpose that God calls us to. Yeah... that was hard to admit. Because more often than I’d like to admit, I am the teenager. It can feel like a slippery slope to say that we have freedom to become all things. Yet what Paul was looking for was NOT an excuse to drink and party. He was saying that we are missing the point... asking the wrong question.

Paul seemed to anticipate this response, though. He even addressed this earlier by referencing a common saying they had all heard before: “All things are permissible, but not all things are beneficial.” Yeah - just because you CAN do something doesn’t mean that you SHOULD do it.

Paul said that he used his freedom to become a “slave to all.” Yet, becoming a slave to all doesn’t mean we also become a slave to their sins, as well. Someone who is strong (isn’t likely to get drunk) could say, “I am free to drink whenever and wherever I choose, because I can handle it. I won’t get drunk. I won’t lose control.”

While that might be true, in the presence of one who is weak (someone who struggles with alcoholism), the stronger person needs to consider the potential consequences of their behavior on the weaker person. If I insist on drinking alcohol in the presence of an alcoholic, my behavior might tempt the alcoholic to “fall off the wagon.”

So what did that really mean for Paul? It meant stepping into their world and into what they are accustomed to. He was a Jewish scholar - a Pharisee - before converting to Christianity. So that’s years of Jewish customs and beliefs ingrained into him. I imagine a scenario like this:

Paul is meeting with some fellow Gentile Christians, and, like any good Nazarene, I imagine they'd be sharing a meal. So the host brings out all these delicious sides. Just one after the other filling up the table. Then they bring out the main dish... bacon wrapped quail. I'm sure every bone in Paul's body would be screaming that he can't, as a good Jew, eat bacon! But he's the guest of honor! Everyone is looking at him as he slowly reaches out and grabs the fillet of quail, brings it to his mouth and takes a big bite. Everyone around him breathes a silent sigh of relief. Why? Because they feel as though he is like them. And Paul knows that eating bacon makes him no less a Christian than not eating it does. He went out of his comfort zone so that he might break down a WELL known barrier between Jews and Gentiles. It was about doing all he could to reach the most people. And it also meant that, the next time Paul shared a meal with his Jewish friends, he didn't bring any bacon with him.

Being free in Christ means we don't see ourselves as better than someone else because maybe we don't struggle with what they do. Being free in Christ might mean driving a friend to an AA meeting, not because he can't drive himself, but because he needs the support. Being free in Christ might mean going to an abortion clinic - not to protest, but to sit and listen to the stories and struggles of the women there. If what God wants from us is a relationship, then isn't that what we should want to build with those around us?

We are not called to tell people what they did wrong, or fight about whose interpretation of the Bible is right. The Holy Spirit can handle that. Christ's commandment to us was to "GO" - not to sit around and hope that those of us who need Him most will wander into some church. Christ touched the leper, sat and talked with the adulteress, and ate with the thieves. Most of the people that he encountered knew of their sins and shortcomings already. They weren't looking for someone to debate wrong and right with. They wanted someone who would listen, someone to understand them, someone to love them and be God with them.

So, what does it look like for you to humble yourself? To step into an uncomfortable place, but a place where you reach those who need it most? To become weak for the weak?

For me, it was taking a road trip to Austin, Texas. Talk about getting out of your comfort zone! But this time, it wasn't the destination that had me feeling a bit out of sorts, but moreso the company with me. I was heading out on a last minute road trip with 2 guys I knew very little about, much less what to make conversation about for 6 hours. So, naturally, there were plenty of times of pregnant silence. You know, an extrovert's worst nightmare. But after winding our way through all the surface level topics, we wound up on the greatly unifying subject of religion and beliefs. Yay!...

So, a little background on me: I was raised by parents who are North American Mission Board missionaries, AND my dad was a Southern Baptist pastor. I was at church 2-3 times a week from birth until about 16. To say I have some deeply ingrained beliefs would be an understatement. Oh, and you KNOW I've got the key verses in mind to defend my points.

Anyway, we start discussing background and beliefs growing up, all good and well. Then we get into the good stuff. We start talking about abortion, homosexuality, gay marriage, women's roles in church... yeah - it got deep. It became clear pretty quickly that this one guy had spent a lot of time reading the Bible and other religious stuff. And yet, to my surprise, he didn't try to argue with me or tell me I was dead wrong. Instead, he asked questions, and probed about my beliefs seeking to understand why I believed what I did, and why. He asked me to point out in the Bible where it referred to the specific beliefs I had clutched onto for so long.

I was the weak one. I thought that I had everything figured out. But the more that he asked and sought to know me, the more I realized that maybe I didn't really have it all figured out. He was the more mature one, the stronger one - becoming weak to help me become stronger. This didn't mean that I changed everything I believed to be what he believed. It caused me to step back and reevaluate myself. I searched my heart and my God asking for Him to grow me and reveal the things I was missing. I have become well acquainted with the verse,

“Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
Point out anything in me that offends you,
and lead me along the path of everlasting life.”

It wasn't some dramatic thing that happened. It was as simple as a conversation.

But it could have gone a totally different way. It could have went how many social media conversations have. He could have used the greater depth of knowledge to make me feel small in my ignorance. He could have dismissed me as a dummy who will never learn. In turn, I would have written him off as a high and mighty know-it-all who only has head knowledge and no real relationship. Thankfully, it didn't.

I saw an example of how best to meet everyone around me where they are at, and join them in their journey. It doesn't matter who they are or if I've ever experienced what they are going through. I can be Jesus to someone simply by being more interested in who they are rather than what they've done.

Instead of asking, “Can I use my freedom to do whatever I want?” we need to be asking, “How can this freedom help me become like someone who needs Jesus?”

We as the church body are struggling with how to handle issues like sexuality, alcohol, and political division. These are important issues that we must work through together BUT, they cannot divide us. These cannot overtake and overshadow our first calling, which is to go and spread the good news. We were not called into a morality system, but a RELATIONSHIP. A relationship that brings life - everlasting life.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] We come to the Communion Table today to celebrate the unity we have with God and with each other through Jesus. This meal invites us to share the table with Jesus and his disciples the night before he was killed. At that meal, he broke bread and gave it to us. He said, “This bread is my body, broken for you. Eat it all.”

Later in the meal, he passed a cup of wine to us. He said, “This wine is my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sin. Drink it all.”

We come to the table today as a people loved and forgiven by God, called to serve each other as Jesus served us. He held back nothing from us, not even his own life, that we might be saved. So too, he invites us to use the freedom he has given us to serve each other and the world around us.

You don’t have to be a member of Catalyst to receive communion with us today. If you’re willing to receive God’s sacrifice for you and to imitate God in serving the world around you, you’re welcome to participate.

Before we approach the table, I’m going to lead you in a prayer of Examen. I’ll ask you four questions to give you space to reflect on what God is calling you to today. After we’ve worked through those questions, I’ll pray for all of us, and then you’re welcome to come forward as you’re ready.

Here’s the first question:

1. When in the last week did I use my freedom to serve others?
2. When in the last week did I insist on my rights above everyone else?
3. When in the next week will I be tempted to insist on my way above all?
4. How can I use my God-given freedom to serve others this week?

Prayer

God of Epiphany,

You have gathered together today a people who is used to insisting on our own ways. We confess that too often we make an idol out of our own freedom, insisting on the rightness of our own causes at the expense of our relationships. We have heard the words of your servant Paul, who used the freedom you gave him to become a slave to everyone he met. We have been challenged again by his example to pursue loving unity with each other rather than the rightness of our causes. And now you invite us to your communion table, this place where we remember that you did not stand aloof in Heaven and declare your righteousness to us sinners here on earth. Rather, you humbled yourself and took the form of a slave, and gave yourself over to death rather than use your freedom to rule over us. It is this loving sacrifice you call us to imitate now. So we approach your table to receive wafers and juice and pray they become a spiritual food for us. Give us the grace we need to imitate you. Give us the grace we need to be your people. Bind us together as one body in your love. Make us one with you and with each other,

that we might offer your love and grace to the world around us. We offer these prayers and approach your table in the name of your son, Jesus.

Closing

A couple of quick things before you go:

First, thank you to you who support Catalyst through regular giving and serving. Thank you for enabling us to do what God is calling us to do right where we are.

Secondly, if you're a guest with us this morning, I want to say again how honored we are to have you with us. We hope you felt welcomed and encouraged and challenged with us this morning. We know how difficult it can be to connect with a new church, and we wanted to make it as easy as possible, so we created an experience called the Newcomers Lunch. We do it once a month. The next one is February 18. They're right after this, and they last about 45 minutes. We feed you, tell you who Catalyst is and what God is doing here, and we give you an easy next step to get connected.

If you'd like to sign up, check the top box on this Next Step card and drop it in the box by the door as you leave.

Assignment/Blessing

Now, Catalyst, since Epiphany is when we ask about God's calling, we're giving you a question each week to spend the week meditating and praying on, discussing with your C-Groups. This week's question is, **Where do I need to pursue unity before I disagree?**

As you go this week, may you find God is making you one with him and with all of us here. May you find that unity is not the same as uniformity, but rather a beautiful mess, where we're all drawn together in the grace we receive through Jesus. May this grace overflow from here into the world around us, that they may know they too are invited into God's family. Go in the grace and peace of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit!