

## **Welcome**

Especially this time of year, you probably hear about programs like Operation Christmas Child. Churches all over the country gather and pack boxes of Christmas gifts to ship to kids in the developing world. They contain everything from stuffed animals and toys to practical things like toothbrushes. Last year alone, OCC collected over 9 *million* boxes.

At the same time, a missionary pastor who lived and worked in Zambia posted her experience from the other side. The churches in her area were some of those who receive those boxes. She shared that the pastors were angry because, in order to receive the boxes, they had to raise the equivalent of \$4,000 to get the boxes from customs. And even more problematic was the cost of the boxes for the Americans who packed them. The boxes are around \$30 each.

For the cost of the toothbrush included in the box, a child in Zambia could buy 30 toothbrushes. \$30 in Zambia would buy enough to feed a family of five for 4 months, 2 breeding goats, or school fees and uniforms for 6 kids for a year.

As the pastor observed, no one had consulted the families - "Would you rather have a box of assorted American goods or would you rather send all of your kids to school this year?"

Probably not hard to guess the answer to that question.

The pastor's blogpost was widely circulated because it presses us to ask some tough questions about how we serve:

When we serve, are we offering aid that is truly useful, aid that respects the person we're aiding? Or are we serving mainly to make ourselves feel better?

In other words, is our serving selfish, or selfless?

As we dream about what's next for Catalyst, we want to ask how we can serve our community and our world in ways that honor others. Our service is grounded not in taking God to those without, but in looking for where God is already at work and joining in.

Today is about saying Yes to God's invitation to go into the world.

## **Message**

We always use November as a way to remember who we are as a church - what does it mean to say that God has called us to be this particular body called Catalyst in this particular place in North-east Dallas. This year, we're sketching out some of the big ideas that are going to be guiding us over the next few years. We began with the idea of friendship, that we want Catalyst to be a place where it's easy to make friends, because friendship is the heart of Jesus' good news. When we make friends with people, they see how God makes friends with them.

Next, we explored what it looks to be a truly diverse church. We saw that diversity isn't a political agenda or a cultural trend, but God's desire for the church from the beginning. We asked what it looks like for Catalyst to embody God's diverse church here on Earth as it is in heaven.

Last week was about discipleship. We saw that following Jesus is less about learning than it is loving and being loved - which can be way scarier than just following a checklist.

Today, we're talking about serving. Serving can be a tricky thing because by nature, we're helping people. And when we're helping other people, it can be easy, ironically, to do it for selfish reasons. Serving feels good. So we end up serving for the good feeling we get. Or we do what we think we would like rather than asking the person we're serving what they need. Or we do things that help in the short term but hurt in the long run.

I want to zoom all the way out to question our assumptions about what we're doing when we serve. This selfish way of serving I want to call the Savior model. It's one that assumes that we have something - goods, wealth, answers - and we're going to take them to people without.

A lot of Christian service - whether local or foreign - is built on a savior model. But when we begin with the assumption that we have and they don't, we establish a one-way relationship. Something more like parent-child or boss-employee than something that's mutually affirming.

[Scripture Slide 1] And we learned clear back at the beginning of the Church that's not how God works. Turn with me in your Bibles to Acts 10. Acts is the story of the early church, in the first years after Jesus ascended to heaven. We get to watch as they figure out what following Jesus looks like (and remember from last week, it's more about relationships than anything else).

One of the first big questions they had to face was who got to follow Jesus. Jesus was Jewish, and so were all his first followers. But what about the rest of the world? Could Gentiles follow Jesus too? And if so, how?

A typical missionary would think, "Easy. We just go tell the Gentiles about Jesus."

And that's *basically* what happened. But there's an important thing to note in the story we're about to read together. This is Peter, one of the church's first leaders. Peter has been visiting Jews in various cities, helping them understand the good news about Jesus.

But now he's just gotten word that a Gentile - a Roman centurion, nonetheless, has specifically requested to see him. Let's read what happens:

24 They arrived in Caesarea the following day. Cornelius was waiting for them and had called together his relatives and close friends. As Peter entered his home, Cornelius fell at his feet and worshiped him.

But Peter pulled him up and said, “Stand up! I’m a human being just like you!” So they talked together and went inside, where many others were assembled.

Peter told them, “You know it is against our laws for a Jewish man to enter a Gentile home like this or to associate with you. But God has shown me that I should no longer think of anyone as impure or unclean. So I came without objection as soon as I was sent for. Now tell me why you sent for me.”

Peter says, "Until two days ago, I wouldn't even have set foot in your house. But God told me that no one is off-limits these days, so here I am. Why did you want to see me?"

Cornelius replied, “Four days ago I was praying in my house about this same time, three o’clock in the afternoon. Suddenly, a man in dazzling clothes was standing in front of me. He told me, ‘Cornelius, your prayer has been heard, and your gifts to the poor have been noticed by God! Now send messengers to Joppa, and summon a man named Simon Peter. He is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner who lives near the seashore.’ So I sent for you at once, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here, waiting before God to hear the message the Lord has given you.”

Cornelius says, "Here I am, a Gentile, praying, and God says, 'You need to talk to Peter and see what's up. So we called for you.'"

34 Then Peter replied, “I see very clearly that God shows no favoritism. In every nation he accepts those who fear him and do what is right. This is the message of Good News for the people of Israel—that there is peace with God through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all...

44 Even as Peter was saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who were listening to the message. The Jewish believers who came with Peter were amazed that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles, too. For they heard them speaking in other tongues and praising God.

Then Peter asked, “Can anyone object to their being baptized, now that they have received the Holy Spirit just as we did?” So he gave orders for them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. -- Acts 10:24-48

Peter goes to the Gentiles and tells them about Jesus. Classic missions story, right?

Except Peter wasn't the first one there. God was. And Peter wouldn't have known to go if God had invited Peter *through the very person Peter was supposed to serve*. And even more, it wasn't just Cornelius and all his Gentile friends and family whose faith grew. Peter got a bigger vision of the kingdom, too!

God invited Peter to Caesarea for Cornelius' good, but for Peter's too. This wasn't just about Peter helping Cornelius. This was about the two of them entering into a relationship that was good for *both* of them.

I love what Peter says there at the end... "Can anyone object to their being baptized, since they've already received the Holy Spirit?"

This is the heart of Christian service: not that we're taking the Spirit to the world, but that the Spirit is already *at work in the world*, and by God's grace, we're invited to participate!

I want to call this model of serving the Pilgrim model. Christians have a long history of setting off on pilgrimages. The idea of a pilgrimage is that there are some things we can only learn about God when we leave where we are. So we serve to discover who God is and how God is at work out there, beyond ourselves, our community.

When we talk about diversity here at Catalyst, we're talking about who our worshipping community is becoming. And when we talk about discipleship, we're talking about how we discover who God is here, in our own hearts and among our own people. Because obviously God is working here among us.

But God is bigger than me. God is bigger than us. God is bigger than Catalyst. And we want to learn who God is out there too.

So as we look to the future, what does a pilgrim model of serving look like at Catalyst? A few ideas:

First, it requires us to be in regular prayer about our serving, both locally and abroad. If we're responding to what the Spirit is already doing in our neighborhoods, our city, our world, we have to be listening for the Spirit. Operation Reindeer isn't a Catalyst project. It's a community project we get to participate in. God is bigger than Catalyst, so we're happy to participate in it.

Second, we have to commit to avoid complacency. When we follow the Spirit, we're always doing something new. We used to take our bounce houses to city events as a way to serve our community. We did that for years - until the city purchased their own bounce houses. We partnered with Chik-Fil-A for a long time on their Trunk or Treat until they had to cancel the event because it got too big for their parking lot.

This is the reality of pilgrim service. When we partner outside our walls, the organizations and scenarios are always changing and evolving, so our service will too. We can't get stuck in doing what we did last year just because it worked last year. We have to remain sensitive to what the Spirit is calling us to next.

Along with that, we have to resist doing what feels good and do what feels right. Many of you remember when the tornado hit Rowlett nearly three years ago. After it hit, churches all over town offered themselves as dropoff points for donations. But we didn't do that. Because we've had a longstanding partnership with LifeMessage, a compassionate ministry here in Rowlett. They're not a Catalyst ministry. We get to partner with them, to be a help to the good work God does through them.

We sent volunteers to LifeMessage. We sent donations to LifeMessage. We took the boxes our denomination gave us for aid to LifeMessage for *them* to distribute. Because they already did all that stuff way better than us. Rather than try to build our own thing, staff and fund our own thing, we looked for where God was already working and joined in. That meant our name wasn't on the list of churches posted on Facebook and all over the city. That didn't feel good for some of us. But we chose to focus not on what make us feel good, but on what truly made a difference.

(And it turned out that when the other churches had collected all their donations, they brought them all to LifeMessage, who was overwhelmed. Without the Catalyst volunteers there helping sort, they couldn't have gotten the donations into the hands of those who needed them.)

Finally, and this is a hard one, we have to avoid letting our service become institutional. Too often, we don't serve unless the Church has officially scheduled a serving opportunity. But when we do that, we forget the church isn't a building or an institution. The Church is *us*, the people. God doesn't wait for the organization to schedule service to call us to serve. God is working in our families, our offices, our neighborhoods. Wherever *you* are, Catalyst can be serving because Catalyst is *you*.

Friends, as we look to the future of Catalyst, we're centering relationships. We want to center everything we do intentionally on relationships - ours with God, ours with each other, and ours with the world around us.

We'll become more diverse, because diversity was God's idea and God's vision for the Church from the beginning.

We'll learn to love well, and we'll learn to let ourselves be loved.

And we'll serve not by showing up, helping and leaving, but by entering into relationships with those God has invited us to serve. Because we recognize that they have something to teach us, if we'll only listen.

The whole world is God's. God is everywhere, calling us to become the Church our city and our world needs.

### **Communion + Examen**

[Communion Slide] Jesus invites us all to the table.

### **Assignment + Blessing**

Where might God be calling you to serve?