

Welcome

I recently joined the Arts & Humanities Commission for the City of Rowlett. There are seven of us on the commission, and when we all introduced ourselves at our first meeting, of course I told them I pastor Catalyst church here in Rowlett. A couple of meetings later, one of the other members, Tamra, told me before the meeting that she had found our youtube channel and watched a few of our gatherings. She said some kind words about my preaching and I thanked her.

But then, a couple of months ago, when I walked into our meeting, she jumped up from her chair and said, "JR. you have the *best* church." I agreed with her, of course, but I had no idea what triggered this reaction. I told her as much and she said, "My brother and I volunteer at Life Message, and some people from your church serve there with us."

It turned out she was talking about one of our C-Groups, the Booth C-Group, that meets on Wednesdays and serves at Life Message once a month. "They are the nicest, kindest people. Of everyone we serve with, they are the best!"

I don't disagree. That exchange was one of my prouder moments since I've pastored here at Catalyst, in large part because this wasn't a one-time encounter. Tamra's impression of Catalyst - and by extension, of Jesus through Catalyst - came as the result of repeated, continual and faithful service. Our C-Group, through their service, became pictures of Jesus.

I want to talk about serving today, and specifically how serving is a pathway by which we come to know God better. It's true that when we serve, those we serve come to know God better. But it's also true that when we serve, we get to know God better.

That's because when we serve, we're imitating God. And the more we act like God, the better we get to know God.

Message

[Series Master Slide] During the Summer, we're asking one basic question: How do we know God? We began last week with the conviction that, if God is our creator, then God is knowable. God is knowable because God *wants* to be known and, by becoming human in the person of Jesus, made himself knowable.

We have four major sources of knowing God: Scripture, the record of God's interactions with us throughout history; Reason, our ability to think and learn and discover; Tradition, how others on the journey of faith have known God; and Experience, what we learn about God from our own lives.

Throughout the summer, we're going to dive into each of those four sources of knowing God, and ask how we can know God better. We began last week with Experience. Last week, we looked at Spiritual Practices that help us know God. Spiritual practices are largely about our interior world, connecting our spirits to God's Spirit.

When most people think of "Experiencing God", this is what we imagine - reading our Bibles, prayer and fasting. And as we saw last week, that's totally true.

But it's not the only way we know God through our daily lives. Our faith has always had a long insistence that we also know God better when we engage with other people. Other people are an invitation to know God better.

We think of serving as something that happens after our relationship to God, or alongside it. We know God, so we serve. Or maybe even more common is the conviction that service is a chore, a burden. It's something we do to be obedient.

We *obey* God, and, when we serve, we get to *know* others. But at the heart of faith is an insistence that when we serve, we get to know God better.

This morning, I want to think through with you some of the ways we know God better when we serve. First, is the serving we do within the community of faith - here at Catalyst, in our C-Groups, less formal ways of serving like bringing a meal to someone who is ill.

[[Scripture Slide 1](#)] Turn first with me to John 13. We've been in this passage several times over the last year - and for good reason: it's a chronicle of Jesus' final words with his followers. They've just had the Last Supper, and he's washed their feet, taking the role of a slave and serving them. Now he's preparing them for the reality that he's not going to be around much longer, and in the midst of that, he gives them a straightforward command:

"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 13:34-35

If this were all we have, we'd spend endless hours arguing what Jesus meant by 'love each other' - after all, there're about a million different definitions of the word love. We love our spouses, our kids, our friends, our city. We love tacos and BBQ.

Love can be sentimental and silly, or it can be deeply serious. So when Jesus told us to "love each other", what did he mean? Well, he said, "Just as I have loved you."

So, our love for each other should look like Jesus' love for us, and he had just very tangibly expressed his love by washing the disciples' feet.

Since those first disciples, the Church has made it a special point to serve each other. Not just because we need help from each other (because we do), but because when we serve each other, we are acting like Jesus. We know Jesus better as we imitate him.

In my prayer in the last couple of months, I've been asking God how I can be a better pastor, more faithful to the community of Catalyst, and the first place God brought me in Scripture was to this verse. I skipped immediately to the "love each other" part. I prayed, "Yeah, yeah, Lord. Love each other. I get it."

But God drew my attention to the first part: "As I have loved you..." Serving each other, loving each other well, is a pathway to knowing God better. When we serve each other in the church, we imitate Jesus. We learn, deep in our bones, who God is, and how God loves us. And then, as we know God better, we learn to serve each other better. It's a positive feedback loop.

As we read through Paul's letters in the New Testament, we hear Paul giving instructions about spiritual gifts, which can get really complicated, but at the heart of Paul's ideas about spiritual gifts is a simple reality:

The Holy Spirit helps us help each other.

Because Jesus told us to serve each other, so Jesus gave us the Holy Spirit to help us obey!

By helping us serve each other better, Jesus helps us know him better.

This is a huge shift we have to make in the way we understand spirituality. In my years as a pastor, I've found that often, as we're younger in our faith, we tend to look to the Church as a place to receive. We come to be filled up by the music, the preaching, maybe the energy of seeing our church family.

But there's a shift that happens (it's not unlike when we're growing up and we shift from letting someone feed us to feeding ourselves). We recognize that church isn't a thing we go to, it's a family we're adopted into. And like a family, we realize we have a responsibility to pull our weight, to contribute, to offer what I have for the good of the rest of my family.

And every time, when that person makes that switch, when they step up and start serving in the Church, they grow. Catalyst is a small church with a small paid staff. I don't have to tell you that volunteers are the heartbeat of our church. Whether it's the musicians and preaching team who put in countless hours throughout the week, or those who serve in our tech booth, showing up early and working to make sure our livestream and in person experience is great. Or our hospitality team - our greeters who welcome us with warm smiles, kind words and friendly handshakes and our coffee team who makes sure we can stay away through the sermons. Our C-Group leaders who create those more intimate spaces for us to gather and grow, serve and celebrate together. All the amazing people who lead our Synthesis and Kids' Ministry, to ensure we're not just offering childcare; we're helping kids to know Jesus! And that doesn't count those who volunteer for special events like our picnics.

God calls us to be part of a church because when we serve each other, we know God better. If you're not serving, you're missing a pathway to knowing God.

Of course, we don't serve only within the church family. Again, from the beginning, Jesus has insisted that we're to serve others - the people we'd consider strangers, outsiders or the not-like-us. And, again, not just because he's trying to start a social work program.

[Scripture Slide 2] In Matthew 25, Jesus is telling parables about the End. He's specifically painting a picture for us of what the world will look like when God establishes justice once and for all. In the last story, he asks us to imagine Jesus is on his throne, and all the people of the world have been brought in front of him. He separates them into two groups - the righteous and unrighteous. The faithful and the unfaithful. He addresses both groups, but I want to hang out specifically on what he says to the righteous this morning:

The King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world. For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.'

"Then these righteous ones will reply, 'Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink? Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing? When did we ever see you sick or in prison and visit you?'

"And the King will say, 'I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!' -- Matthew 25:34-40

Did you catch that at the end? What makes the righteous righteous is the fact that they were serving those around them. And Jesus insists that, when they were serving others, they were actually serving Jesus himself.

The writer of Hebrews echoes this sentiment when she says,

Keep on loving each other as brothers and sisters. Don't forget to show hospitality to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without realizing it! Remember those in prison, as if you were there yourself. Remember also those being mistreated, as if you felt their pain in your own bodies. -- Hebrews 3:1-3

When we serve others, we're really serving Jesus. When we show hospitality to strangers, they might be divine messengers.

Theologians haven't been afraid to take this to its logical extreme: when we serve, we get to know God better. God is present in others in a way God is not present with us. But God-in-the-Other is *available* to us. So when we serve, we get to know God better.

Theologian and activist Dorothy Day, who founded the Catholic Worker Movement, put a very fine point on it: **“I really only love God as much as I love the person I love the least.”** -- Dorothy Day

Since I've been a part of Rowlett's Arts & Humanities Commission, I'm learning a lot about our city, and God's heart for our city. I'm learning, for instance, that - much like many cities in the metroplex - Rowlett is struggling with change. We're growing really fast, and there are a lot of citizens who wish we could turn back the clock to the good ole days when we were a little isolated town. They don't know what to do with all this change, all these new folks.

As I pray for our city, God is showing me that we are the kind of church our city needs now and in the future. A church committed to welcoming new folks, to making everyone feel welcome no matter where they're from or what their background is. A church that knows change is hard, especially when it's change we didn't choose for ourselves.

Catalyst's faithful commitment to God, our confidence that God is with us and working to bring about good is something our city needs. I'm learning how God loves our city as I learn to love our city. That's how serving works.

So the question for you today is: how are you serving? How is your serving helping you to know God better?

That's an important question because it's entirely possible to serve without knowing God better (that's what the people in Matthew 25 were doing! They were serving Jesus and didn't even realize it!).

Or maybe you're not serving. Maybe you've been sensing there's a next step you need to take and the Holy Spirit is telling you this is that step. Is there a way God is calling you to serve your church family? Is there something in the community you have the chance to do? A need you see? (Maybe a need your church family could help you meet?)

God created us to love as God loves us, which means our love is tangible. When we serve, we get to know God. And the Holy Spirit helps us serve.

So how are you getting to know God better this week?

Communion + Examen

Jesus loves us so we can love each other. When we love like Jesus, we know Jesus better.

1. **How have I served in the last week?**
2. **How have I gotten to know God better through my serving?**
3. **Where is God calling me to serve?**