

Many of you may remember back in April when my grandmother passed away. My wife and I made the journey to Mound City, KS for the funeral. It was a beautiful time of grieving and celebrating the life of my grandmother. My mom is one of four kids, and I'm one of ten grandkids. We don't all get together very often anymore, and it was really my wife's first chance to spend more than a couple of hours with that whole group. We laughed, we cried, we did all the things families do when they are all together after too long apart.

As we were driving home, processing the weekend, my wife mentioned that she felt like she had gotten to know me better because of the weekend. I was surprised - we're married ten years as of a couple of weeks from now. I asked her what she meant, and she began to offer observations of family dynamics she saw for the first time that weekend, dynamics that have shaped the person I am.

Stories about my grandma raising her kids, values passed from her to my mom to me. Sibling interactions between my mom and her brothers my wife recognized in me. Stories from cousins of us growing up, stories I had either forgotten or really didn't want shared.

When you're in a relationship with someone else - romantic or otherwise, to get to know their family is a real gift. Because we learn a lot about a person by learning how they're in relationship with other people. We actually get to know someone in a different way when we see how they relate to others, especially in their family.

What does that mean for our faith? If faith is about being in relationship with God, then how do we get to know the rest of God's family?

To do that, we have to talk about the Church. And not just Catalyst (though we'll do that next week!). Today, we're going to explore the Church universal, the body of Christ that extends all over the world and throughout history. We'll ask how knowing the universal church helps us know God more fully.

Because we're all part of God's family, and by knowing God's family better, we can know God better.

### **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 with Experience, exploring how we can know God better through what happens in our lives - our private practices and acts of service both in relation to others.

Today, we're exploring the second source of knowing God we have: Tradition. Especially for us Protestants, Tradition can sound like a dirty word. Religious tradition conjures up the worst of the "that's how we've always done it" feels. Maybe you were raised in a denomination that has a ton of liturgy - lots of standing and sitting and recitation. Or maybe you just grew up in one that had arbitrary rules - I knew a guy who left church when a deacon told him to cut his long hair because it's disgraceful for men to have long hair - while standing in front of that long-haired Jesus painting.

So yeah, of all the sources of knowing God we're exploring this summer, I wouldn't be surprised if Tradition is the one that many of us are least excited about. But Tradition isn't always a dirty word; I'd suggest tradition isn't even *mainly* a dirty word. Fireworks on the 4th of July is a tradition. So are gifts at Christmas and Thanksgiving meals. Whenever my mom's family gets together, we sing a prayer before a meal. It's silly, but it's also something that marks us uniquely as our family.

Traditions bind us together, remind us we're part of something larger than ourselves. Traditions are how families pass values and identity down from generation to generation. And that's true for the Church as well.

So when we talk about Tradition as a way to know God, we're talking about the Church as the family of God. How does the Church pass on God's values and our identity as God's people?

We begin by acknowledging the great gift that the global church is, that it is the fulfillment of a promise God made to an ancient nomad:

"The LORD took Abram outside and said to him, "Look up into the sky and count the stars if you can. That's how many descendants you will have!" -- Genesis 15:5

The Revelation looks forward to the end of all things, anticipating the Church as the fulfillment of this promise:

"After this I saw a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb. They were clothed in white robes and held palm branches in their hands. And they were shouting with a great roar, 'Salvation comes from our God who sits on the throne and from the Lamb!'" -- Revelation 7:9-10

When we talk about the Church, we mean more than just this body we call Catalyst. We mean all the people of God, in every nation, from every people, in every language all over the world. We are one giant spiritual family, brothers and sisters from every corner of the globe.

John's vision in Revelation isn't just a sneak preview of the End. It's also an invitation, a reminder to us in the present: Church is never just what we're doing right here. When we gather for worship, when we sing and pray and come to the table together, we're joining in with the billions across the world and throughout history who Jesus has made God's sons and daughters.

[Scripture Slide] The book of Hebrews is a sermon delivered to a struggling church. The preacher's goal is to remind them that they're much more than just the persecuted, pressured people who gather for worship amid all their stresses and insecurities. Rather, they're part of a global spiritual family. In chapter 11, the preacher begins clear back at the beginning and starts recounting stories of people who trusted God, people who are part of God's spiritual family - which makes them part of *our* spiritual family.

And then, having recounted story after story after story, the preacher says this:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne. -- Hebrews 12:1-2

Therefore - on account of all these people who make up a huge cloud of witnesses, let's press on. The preacher in Hebrews insists that these people are good for our faith. Their examples, their stories, help us have a deeper faith, a stronger relationship with God.

The global church helps us know God better. Because knowing someone's family helps us know them better.

We're small, finite creatures. Especially when we consider that God has been at work in human history since the dawn of time, it'd be foolish to think that I am the first person to understand God fully and completely. Of course not! You know God differently from how I know God.

Which is why we need each other. We know God better by learning from each other.

St. Francis of Assisi is a medieval friar who took a vow of poverty and was a preaching fanatic. I love reading about St. Francis - his story challenges me to be a better preacher, and to love better.

Ignatius of Loyola was a Spanish believer who lived in the 1500s (we share a birthday, which isn't important). His writings more than anyone else have shaped my personal prayer life in the last several years. Through his life and legacy, my relationship with God has grown immeasurably.

There's a Kenyan professor named Jesse Mugambe who wrote a book in the 1980s on African Liberation Theology - it was a time when many African nations were still struggling under the weight of European

colonialism. That all changed after the Berlin Wall fell and the Cold War ended, and in the late 90s, Mugambe wrote another book challenging his previous work. He argued that, because the global context had changed, African theology had to change too, and laid out some provocative suggestions. Mugambe was the first theologian that showed me how the Bible matters in a contemporary political world (and that world is very different from mine). Through Mugambe's work, the Bible became more powerful and more urgent in my life.

I've shared before about a woman named Milan who lives in the Dominican Republic. Milan's faith compelled her to open a school that transformed her community - in one of the poorest parts of the DR. Milan challenges me to imagine how faith can make a tangible difference in local communities.

Sushaku Endo's masterful novel *Silence* is a reflection on what it means to be a Japanese Christian, with all the weight of Western influence on Japanese history and culture. That book absolutely devastated me when I first read it, and I still think about its themes. Endo laments the historical colonialism that brought Christianity to Japan while at the same time expressing gratitude for the Jesus he knows who is at the heart of faith.

Our Catalyst Book Club is working our way through a book called *Womanist Midrash* by Dr. Wilda Gafney. Womanism is Black Feminism and in case it's not obvious, that's not me at all. So I'm enjoying reading the Bible from a perspective that's really different from my own, and then getting to discuss with others in my church family. And I have to tell you, one of the big things I'm learning from that book is what it's like to read the Bible as someone who isn't the star of the story. It's pretty easy for me as a man and a pastor to identify with Abraham, Moses, David, even Jesus. Gafney is challenging me to pay more attention to people who aren't like me, to ask what their faith story is, who God is to them.

A couple of years ago, my wife and I went to Germany, and we had the chance to connect with a Nazarene church in Frankfurt called Church in Action. Christianity has nearly vanished in Europe, and churches there really struggle to connect with a thoroughly secular culture. Church in Action is thriving. They're innovative, creative and vibrant, and the hours I got to spend with their pastors was challenging and inspiring. They've really transformed how I think about ministry and community engagement here.

And I could go on and on, but I hope you're beginning to get a sense of just what an amazing gift the global church is. No matter what you've experienced, you're not alone. And no matter who you are, you have something to learn from the rest of our massive international family.

So as we move into a time of reflection and response, I want to ask: how connected are you to the global church? If I were guessing, my hunch is that for many of us in here, this is a big hole in our faith. We don't know many of the saints who have gone before us, who cheer us on from that great cloud of witnesses the preacher in Hebrews spoke of. We don't know what Christianity looks like in other nations, sounds like in other languages. We don't know how other people of God know God.

This is an invitation, then, for us to grow. By knowing God's family better, we get to know God better.

What would it look like for you to get to know God's family better this week?

**Communion + Examen**

[Communion Slide] We receive Communion with the whole church, all over the world!

1. Who has God brought into my life who has a different faith journey than me?
2. How well do I know God's global church family?
3. How is God inviting me to a deeper relationship through the global church?

**Assignment + Blessing**

How can you get to know the global church this week?