

Welcome

In his book *Racism without Racists*, author Eduardo Bonilla-Silva recounts a study that was really troubling to me. In this study, researchers interviewed two groups of white people: they asked the first group if they had any non-white friends. Most of the group said yes, then listed those non-white friends. They asked the other group to list friends, then asked them to identify how many of those friends were non-white. Nearly none of them named a person of color as a friend.

What's more, when they began interrogating the nature of the relationships in the first group, it turned out that, as a rule, the persons of color white people listed as 'friends' were really more like acquaintances. They never hung out outside of work, couldn't name spouses, kids, partners, hobbies, etc. Because they wanted to appear diverse, the white people in the study promoted acquaintances of color to 'friend' even though they weren't actually friends.

So there's a gap here: we *feel like we should* have friends who don't look like us, but we don't. So when we're asked, we tend to promote acquaintances to the level of friendship. But it's an *appearance* of a diverse friend group, not real diversity.

That study has been haunting me because it rings so true. White people, as a rule, we are not good at real diversity. Studies have shown that, as a rule, white people have fewer real friends not of our racial group than any other group. Friends of color here, you do much better at this - partly because you're around white people all the time.

But regardless, none of us are as good at this as we should be. Over fifty years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. observed that Sunday mornings are the most segregated hour in America, and that hasn't changed much in the last half century. That's not who we want to be as a church. As we covered last week, we want to be a place of authentic friendships, and we want those friendships to be diverse.

So today, we're going to talk about diversity. We're going to see that it's God's idea, and we're going to consider how we can follow Jesus better as we make diversity a priority in our lives and in our church.

Message

Here at Catalyst, we always take the four weeks leading up to Advent to reflect on who we are as a Church and dream about the future. Last year, we introduced four big ideas we're organizing ourselves around moving forward. So for the next four weeks, we're going to revisit those ideas and ask two questions: What does each mean for Catalyst and what does each mean for *me* as a part of Catalyst?

This year, we're going to be exploring how each big idea is found in the life and ministry of Jesus, and we're calling the series Proximity Warning because each big idea is grounded in a close relationship to Jesus. When we draw closer to God, our lives change. Fair warning.

We saw that last week when we explored our first big idea, Friendship. We saw how Jesus garnered a reputation as a 'friend of sinners' specifically because he got up close and personal with them. He shared his life with them. Friendship prioritizes proximity.

Our next big idea is Diversity. Of all four of our big ideas, this is the one that can seem, at first blush, to be the least biblically based. Diversity has become, after all, a buzz word in today's culture. Companies now launch diversity initiatives, conduct racial sensitivity training and more. It's fair to ask: by insisting Diversity is one of our four big ideas shaping how God is calling us forward, are we just following cultural trends?

When we introduced this idea last year, I illustrated that this is far from the case. Beginning in the first chapter of Genesis and ending with John's vision of Heaven in Revelation, I showed how diversity has been God's plan for God's people from the beginning. Diversity was God's idea, and if we truly want to be a church that exists on Earth as we will in Heaven, then we have to make diversity a priority. After all, here's what John saw in his vision of heaven:

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

God is endlessly creative, and intended from the beginning for humanity to spread across the earth and diversify. God looks at our varied cultures and ethnicities as a beautiful mosaic, each of us contributing differently to God's church (this is the body metaphor the Apostle Paul used with the Corinthians - we're all different body parts, but together we make up one body.)

So what does making diversity a priority look like for Catalyst? Why is it so important for us as we look to the future?

When I originally outlined this sermon, it was going to be a bunch of examples of Jesus prioritizing diversity - from the diversity among his 12 disciples to the women who travelled with him (and funded him!) to the diverse peoples to whom he ministered.

[Scripture Slide] But that wasn't the right approach. After all, I don't think you and I need to be convinced Jesus loves everyone. So instead, I want to spend our time this morning in one particular story - one of my all-time favorites. I want to look at the story of Jesus encountering the Samaritan woman at the well.

We visit this story a couple of times a year, I think (like I said, it's one of my favorites). But today, I don't want to focus on Jesus and the woman. I want to attend to the *disciples*. Because if we're being honest, that's where most of us in this room would be in the story. So as we read, pay attention to where they

are, what they're doing and most importantly, how their inattention to diversity actually keeps them from following Jesus.

It's a bit anachronistic to describe the hatred between Jews and Samaritans as 'racism' since it wasn't based on skin color (and race is a social category that wasn't created until the 1500s), but the biases and prejudices were similar, and just as systemic as racism today - there's a reason Jesus used a Samaritan as the hero of one of his parables to a Jewish audience.

Jesus and most of his disciples were from a region called the Galilee, which was in the Northern part of Israel. Jerusalem, the capital and home of the Temple, is in Southern Israel. Between them was Samaria. There was so much animosity between Jews and Samaritans that Jews travelling from the Galilee to Jerusalem would usually go around Samaria - adding time to the trip, but avoiding having to go through Samaria. Of course, it probably won't surprise you that Jesus didn't waste time with that nonsense. Let's read together, beginning in verse 4:

He had to go through Samaria on the way. Eventually he came to the Samaritan village of Sychar, near the field that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there; and Jesus, tired from the long walk, sat wearily beside the well about noontime. Soon a Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Please give me a drink." He was alone at the time because his disciples had gone into the village to buy some food. -- John 4:4-8

If you've ever heard this story taught, you've likely heard how transgressive Jesus is here: he not only goes through Samaria, but he breaks the Billy Graham Rule by spending time alone with a woman - a Samaritan woman! But notice why Jesus is alone: the disciples had gone into Sychar to buy some food.

This is the sort of casual bigotry that keeps us from being truly diverse: Samaritan food was good enough for the disciples to buy, but they weren't about to stay in Sychar. They weren't about to get to *know* any Samaritans.

We're going to skip over the exchange between Jesus and the woman - it's fascinating, but remember we're focused on the disciples. Suffice to say, Jesus puts himself in proximity to her. He gets to know her and her life, and the result of their brief conversation is in verse 25:

The woman said, "I know the Messiah is coming—the one who is called Christ. When he comes, he will explain everything to us."

Then Jesus told her, "I AM the Messiah!"

Over and over in the gospels, we see Jesus' proximity to people transform them. But what about the disciples?

Just then his disciples came back. They were shocked to find him talking to a woman, but none of them had the nerve to ask, “What do you want with her?” or “Why are you talking to her?”

They're scandalized by Jesus' proximity - physically and relationally! - to the woman. The woman leaves and tells her people all about Jesus. But what are the disciples doing?

The woman left her water jar beside the well and ran back to the village, telling everyone, “Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did! Could he possibly be the Messiah?” So the people came streaming from the village to see him.

Meanwhile, the disciples were urging Jesus, “Rabbi, eat something.” But Jesus replied, “I have a kind of food you know nothing about.”

“Did someone bring him food while we were gone?” the disciples asked each other.

The disciples bring back food (can you imagine how proud they must have been, to have escaped from the disgusting Samaritan city with the food they'd been sent to get?). But Jesus tells them he's not hungry because he's full from doing God's work:

Then Jesus explained: “My nourishment comes from doing the will of God, who sent me, and from finishing his work. You know the saying, ‘Four months between planting and harvest.’ But I say, wake up and look around. The fields are already ripe for harvest. The harvesters are paid good wages, and the fruit they harvest is people brought to eternal life. What joy awaits both the planter and the harvester alike! You know the saying, ‘One plants and another harvests.’ And it’s true. I sent you to harvest where you didn’t plant; others had already done the work, and now you will get to gather the harvest.”

Here's where it gets really interesting: Note that the disciples left Jesus at the well, went into the city, and returned - according to Jesus - empty handed. But the woman leaves Jesus at the well, goes into the city, and returns with the whole city behind her, coming to meet Jesus.

And even as they're coming, Jesus points and says, "Wake up and look around! The fields are already ripe for harvest!"

The 'harvest' here is those Samaritans the disciples didn't think twice about. Jesus' point is that he sent them into town not just for physical food, but to do his work, to announce his good news. The disciples were sent as Jesus' representatives *and their own biases and prejudices kept them from seeing their neighbors.*

Thank God, then, for this Samaritan woman, who proved to be a more faithful follower than Jesus' own disciples:

Many Samaritans from the village believed in Jesus because the woman had said, "He told me everything I ever did!" When they came out to see him, they begged him to stay in their village. So he stayed for two days, long enough for many more to hear his message and believe. -- John 4:25-41

Diversity was God's plan from the beginning. And Jesus went out of his way to minister to and engage people from all backgrounds and walks of life. The early church made it a point to go all over the known world, welcoming people into this new creation. One early Christian author said it like this:

Christ himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us. -- Ephesians 2:14

The early church was painfully aware of how difficult it is to bring peoples of different worldviews, cultures and ethnicities together. Race only further complicates those differences. But they insisted that Jesus brings us all together, that he tears down the walls of hostility that separate us.

This is an especially important issue for our city. Rowlett is one of the ten fastest growing cities in the US. In the last thirty years, we've tripled in size, from 23,000 in 1990 to over 70,000 by next year. With the additions of the tollway and the DART station, our city is becoming more and more diverse by pretty much any metric you can measure: racially, by age, and more.

A church that doesn't prioritize diversity is one that won't be ready to spread Jesus' good news to the Rowlett of 2020 and beyond. We want to be a church *for* our community. From the beginning, Catalyst has been a church where it's important to us that anyone who comes in feels immediately comfortable. Diversity is a big part of that. We want young and old. Male and female. Black, white, Asian, Latinx, Indigenous. No matter who you are, we want you to feel like this is your place, and we're your people.

What does that look like?

It means we continue to educate ourselves as individuals and as a church. We continue to work to bring a diversity of voices to the platform and into our lives. We seek out those who aren't like us. Like Jesus did, we make *proximity with those who are different from us* a priority in our lives.

We also have to note that Jesus didn't claim to be color-blind. He didn't say to the Samaritans, "I think of you as pretty much other Jews." Rather, he came to them *as Samaritans* and welcomed them into his new kingdom. Similarly, the early church didn't insist Gentiles become Jews (well, some did, but they were overruled). Rather, they insisted God loved Gentiles just as they are.

So we have to ask the question: what unique contributions do Black Christians bring to the body of Christ? What about our Hispanic brothers and sisters? Our Asian and Indigenous believers? If you can't answer those questions, it means you haven't asked the question, haven't investigated. And that means *you're missing out on part of who God is*.

When the author of Ephesians wrote that Jesus tears down the wall of hostility between us, he *didn't* say that Jesus makes us all the same. Remember John's vision in Revelation is a vast multitude from every nation and people. He could still spot the differences, even in his heavenly vision.

Difference isn't bad. Diversity was God's idea. God isn't color-blind, and neither should we be. God revels in our differences, celebrates them as expressions of God's own image.

So we want to be a church that brings all of ourselves to the table, a church that welcomes and celebrates all God is doing.

Real discipleship values diversity. Real diversity requires proximity.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus gives us food and drink that point to his true work. Don't miss it!

1. What relationships in my life are truly diverse friendships?
2. What keeps me from being in proximity to people who aren't like me?
3. How can I make it a point to be in proximity to people who aren't like me this week?

Assignment + Blessing

Have a lunch, read a book, do something to put yourself in proximity!