

Welcome

When you hear the word 'diversity', what comes to mind? Maybe you think of diversity as a noble goal, something to be pursued. Maybe you roll your eyes, hearing a trendy buzzword. Or maybe you're on the other side - you've heard 'diversity' trumpeted for so long without any *real* change that it just makes you cringe.

I'm somewhere in the middle of all that. I can't stand the folks who use it as a buzzword - especially when it's a marketing ploy that doesn't translate into real diversity.

But what, exactly, is *good* diversity?

For the last several years, anytime I think about diversity, I think about Derek Black.

You might have heard his story before (I love to tell it). Derek is the son of some of the most prominent white supremacists in the country. His godfather is David Duke, the former grand wizard of the KKK. He started a blog to indoctrinate kids with white nationalist values. And at 19 years old, he was hailed as the leading light of the next generation of white nationalism.

But Derek was worried he might be in an echochamber, so he decided to go to college at the most liberal school in his state.

The story of what happened to Derek at college is the story of why he has renounced white nationalism and works today to bring others out of the movement. And the key to Derek's transformation was his movement out of homogeneity into diversity.

In other words, diversity is good *not* because it's trendy but because diversity teaches us how to see the image of God in people who are not like us. Diversity teaches us to love our neighbors as ourselves. God created us to be diverse, and to love diversity.

Message

It's November, and believe it or not, we have four weeks until Advent, the beginning of a new year for the Church. Catalyst always spends these last weeks remembering who we are and centering ourselves to do a new good work in this next year.

This year, we're calling our series Catalyst in the time of COVID because our experience of being church together has changed so radically in this last year thanks to the global pandemic we're living through. For the vast majority of this year, we've been worshipping virtually, seeing each other less frequently, able to do less ministry together. We've had to get creative.

So in light of all that, we're going to revisit our core values one by one and ask what it looks like for us to be church while we're socially distanced. We began last week with Friendship. We saw that God makes intentional movements toward us in relationship, and so - even though we're still in the midst of a

pandemic - we can and should make intentional moves toward one another. Friendship takes intention. Today, we're going to explore our second core value, Diversity.

This one is easy to misunderstand on a number of levels. Maybe the easiest is the most superficial: it's easy for us to confuse appearance of diversity for true diversity. In plain terms: if we see older and younger people present, we assume diversity by age. If we see men and women, we assume gender equity. If we see more than just white people, we assume racial diversity.

It's easy to assume real diversity from the *appearance* of diversity. But that's not always the case (in fact, it may not *usually* be the case). For there to be real diversity, the various groups who make up the larger group all have to be represented in the decision-making powers of the larger group.

If a group is a mixture of older and younger people, but the older folks are the ones who call all the shots, then it's not *really* diverse. If a group has a bunch of different ethnicities and cultures in it, but only one group is making the rules and determining how things go, then it's not *really* diverse.

We actually have a word for that superficial, apparent diversity: tokenism. It's not true diversity - it actually keeps real diversity from happening.

[**Scripture Slide 1**] Turn with me to Acts 6. Now, I know we're using a lot of contemporary buzzwords - diversity, tokenism, even race, but this issue of just representation in the Church is one that goes back to the earliest days of the Church. Of course they didn't use the same vocabulary we do, but we can see the same kinds of issues at work. So let's dive into one of the first big conflicts in the early Church.

The Church started at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came to live within and among those first followers of Jesus. The Church grew exponentially in those first days, and the poor and vulnerable were particularly attracted. Because the Church began during a festival season, there were Jews from all over the world visiting Jerusalem, Jews who heard the good news about Jesus and believed in his resurrection.

Then as now, a small minority of Jews actually lived in the Holy Land. Most lived elsewhere in the world, and grew up speaking Greek or another language as their first language, learning Hebrew so they could read Scripture and participate in worship.

Jews who lived in Israel, Jews who spoke Hebrew and Aramaic as their first language, had a tendency to look down on Jews who were Greek-speaking, and this reared its head in the early Church. Watch and see how it plays out:

As the believers rapidly multiplied, there were rumblings of discontent. The Greek-speaking believers complained about the Hebrew-speaking believers, saying that their widows were being discriminated against in the daily distribution of food.

Okay a couple of notes here: first, there were Greek-speaking believers present, but they weren't being treated equally. That's a perfect example of superficial diversity, and why it doesn't go far enough. The mere presence of Greek-speaking Christians didn't mean that the earliest Church was a truly just and equitable body.

This is a real problem. And it's one the 12 disciples - the de facto leaders of the Church - wasted no time in trying to solve. How?

So the Twelve called a meeting of all the believers. They said, "We apostles should spend our time teaching the word of God, not running a food program. And so, brothers, select seven men who are well respected and are full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will give them this responsibility. Then we apostles can spend our time in prayer and teaching the word."

I love the wisdom of the 12 here. They say, "Hey. This is a problem. But it's not one we have the capacity or ability to solve. So we need to get some folks to be in charge of this."

But again, in and of itself, that's not necessarily going to fix anything. After all, there was presumably *someone* in charge of food distribution before this, and the way they were running it was allowing injustice to flourish. So what did the Church do different this time? Take a look:

Everyone liked this idea, and they chose the following: Stephen (a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit), Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas of Antioch (an earlier convert to the Jewish faith). These seven were presented to the apostles, who prayed for them as they laid their hands on them. -- Acts 6:1-6

Whoa! Totally innovative, right? They got seven people to oversee the process! Because nothing fixes problems like bureaucracy, am I right?

Well here's what we miss (because we're not ancient Hebrews reading in the original language): All seven of those men chosen have *Greek* names. Meaning they're from Greek-speaking families. In other words, the Church, when they saw they had a diversity problem, made it right by elevating the *people who were underrepresented* to places of power.

The Greek widows weren't getting food? Put some Greek believers in charge of the food distribution. And the problem was solved. Everyone got food and the Church was able to focus on its mission: spreading the good news about Jesus' resurrection to everyone they encountered.

Friends, as Catalyst has worked in the last several years to prioritize diversity, we've taken some important steps to ensure we have broad representation in our decision-making bodies. When it has come time to select new members of our Leadership, we've considered gender, age and race as we choose which voices are shaping Catalyst moving forward. We've been intentional in our hiring practices along these same lines as well.

One of the big reasons we use a preaching team here is because otherwise you'd be stuck with my perspective 52 weeks a year. And my perspective isn't *bad* (I think it's pretty great, actually!) but it is *limited*. I'm a married, white male who's not getting any younger. By hearing only my perspective from the pulpit, Catalyst is limited to who is represented in preaching.

And I know there aren't very many silver linings to the pandemic, but one of them has been the guest preachers we've been able to "bring in". We had an Indian-American woman who has a PhD in folklore, Dr. Michelle Reyes, share with us about how the folklore in Scripture can shape us to be God's people. We had a global leader in the efforts to decolonize Christianity, Sandra Maria Van Opstal, speak to us about God's call to disrupt injustice when we see it. And we had Rev Sonya Brown, a Navajo woman and pastor in our denomination, invite us to consider how we can lament together as a way to hear the marginalized and ignored among us (and all this the day before Indigenous People's Day!). Friends, I am nearly certain that could not have happened in a "normal" year.

I'm equally certain we wouldn't have had the opportunity for those three powerful preachers to speak to us had we not been a congregation that has prioritized diversity over the last several years. We are *earning* partnerships like these in part because we are doing real work to embrace actual diversity.

The other caution we always have to make is that we're not chasing diversity because it's trendy right now. Companies all over America are hiring "diversity ambassadors" or "Chief Diversity Officers". After every racial incident, more book clubs spring up with people asking how we can be anti-racist.

These are good things. But it's also easy to imagine the Church is just following a cultural trend. But here at Catalyst, we know diversity was God's idea. From the first command God gave humanity - to be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth to the Spirit at Pentecost enabling the Church to flourish in multiple languages to that vision in Revelation of the countless multitude from every culture, singing in every language, we know that the Church ought to be *leading* our nation in celebrating and embodying true, authentic diversity.

And what's more, for Catalyst, we know a diverse Church is what Rowlett needs. Our city is growing both in terms of numbers *and* demographics. No matter what metric you want to use - age, race, class, our city is diversifying. If we want to be a Church that is for our city, a church ministering in the place God planted us, we need to be good at diversity.

I mentioned earlier that diversity is what saved Derek Black. At college, Derek Black was outed as a white supremacist. He became the school pariah. But there was this one other kid. He was the only Jewish kid at the school - and definitely not a fan of white supremacy. But because he was the only Jewish kid, he had taken to hosting these Sabbath dinners on Friday nights where he would prepare a meal and invite several friends from all backgrounds, races and religions.

He decided to invite Derek. Against the wishes of his other guests. But Derek said Yes. He attended a Sabbath dinner and *kept* attending Sabbath dinners and the other students there kept challenging him on his racist ideas and beliefs. They held him accountable for the things he'd published on his blog.

And it didn't take long before Derek realized his ideas were garbage. He turned his back on his family, his legacy, his godfather.

That wouldn't have happened if Derek hadn't sought out diversity. He'd still be a white nationalist.

Friends, I know the pandemic has made pretty much everything about our lives harder. That can include intentional movement toward diversity. It's harder to make new friends, harder to get outside our bubbles (especially when we're being told to stay in them!), harder to sit across a table from someone who's different from us.

So I hope that, in part, you receive this message in a spirit of encouragement. We have not stopped, in this last year, moving toward the Church God is calling us to be. We have taken great strides toward becoming the Church Rowlett needs in 2021 and beyond.

I hope to, your spirit is stirred yet again by the impossibly huge vision of the Church. I hope your imagination is provoked by the possibilities ahead of us as we faithfully fulfill God's call.

Authentic diversity isn't easy. It doesn't come naturally to us. Even the 12 apostles, in the first days of the Church, missed it! But I hope we can follow their lead and look to how we can ensure that all our voices are heard in this body we call Catalyst.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus sets a place for each of us.

1. How have I pursued real diversity in the last month?
2. Where have I seen or settled for shallow diversity or tokenism?
3. How can I speak up for real diversity in the weeks ahead?

Assignment + Blessing

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