

Welcome

Hi, my name is Sonya Brown and I am part of the preaching team here at Catalyst Church. I grew up on the Navajo Reservation in Arizona and I can't recall being told of specific months where we can only highlight who we are. Stories of traditions, customs, people, and places were told at different times throughout the year. These stories told of who we were, where we came from, and about the other tribes and cultures that interacted with our people. We were told of similarities between cultures and even of conflicts between tribes, settlers, and the government. It was interesting when my family moved off reservation and we attended a public school in Flagstaff, Arizona. It was there where I learned that the culture group I am part of has a specific date to highlight Indigenous people of the United States.

Did you know that November is Native American Heritage Month or American Indian Heritage Month? This month was designated by President George W. Bush in 1990 to highlight the American Indian or Indigenous people of this land. In my own curiosity, I googled, "Why do we celebrate heritage months in the United States?" It was a common asked question and Babson College in Massachusetts had a good response. Their website explained, "In the United States, Heritage Months are periods within the year that are designated to celebrate and acknowledge various ethnic and marginalized groups. These are times not only to celebrate, but also to educate others on various groups' histories and contributions to American History."

I appreciate hearing the stories shared of cultural and ancestral ties, acknowledgement of lived experiences, contributions people in the community made and continue to make, and how significant anniversaries, achievements and struggles have shaped each community. The celebration of diversity and a push towards inclusion is dependent on how the people and community are willing to engage and embrace the diversity surrounding us.

As the church, we don't have mandatory diversity classes like we have in our jobs or educational system. Diversity in the church challenges us to reimagine life together as the body of Christ. We are called to actively participate and work together because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Let's begin by singing together, celebrating this God who loves us exactly as we are and draws us all together to be a new family, a spiritual family not despite our differences, but because of them.

Will you stand and sing with me?

Message

In these final weeks before Advent, we're revisiting our core values. Our series is called *Church of Theseus*, which is a callback to an ancient thought experiment. Imagine a man named Theseus owns a ship. Over the years, as he works to maintain the ship, he eventually replaces every part - the mast, the sails, the planks in the deck and the hull. Years later, after every single piece of original wood has been replaced, the question is: is this still the ship of Theseus?

We could ask the same question of Catalyst: our staff is wholly different from a decade ago. Much of the congregation has changed. Even the place we gather is different - we used to meet in living rooms and movie theaters and even other church buildings! It's worth asking: are we still the same church God planted in Rowlett all those years ago?

We're answering that question with a resounding YES! Though our congregation has changed over the years, the same God who planted us and called us is still with us, leading us through the future.

For a long time here at Catalyst, we've reserved the last few weeks before Advent begins to explore our core values. And even those have changed - they were once Love, Grow and Serve. But several years ago, our leadership recognized that Catalyst has grown and changed, and it was time to set new core values, too.

Our first core value is Friendship. At Catalyst, we believe Friendship is the heart of Jesus' good news. We spent two months in Journey to Love, exploring friendship with God.

Today, we're exploring our second core value, Diversity. The Merriam-Webster definition defines diversity as, "The condition of having or being composed of different elements: variety; especially: the inclusion of people of different races, cultures, etc. in a group or organization." Inclusion of people is inviting the culture around us. The church must embrace the culture and identity of diverse groups who are not part of the dominant racial group of the gathered church.

There was a lack of diversity growing up on the Navajo Reservation. Yes, there is a history of how US policies and treaties have segregated many Indigenous People on reservations. But, I do remember that not all my teachers were Navajo and there were a few other ethnic groups who lived and worked in the small town I lived in. My world became more diverse when my family moved off reservation to Flagstaff, Arizona. The demographic changed in school and the community we moved to. But, the church my family attended did not reflect the diversity of our community. I can understand being with others who look like you. It's comfortable and safe. One thing I do remember was not inviting my non-Native friends to church because I didn't want them to feel uncomfortable or think I was making the other church members uncomfortable as well. But this church gathering did not reflect the community I lived in and reflect the diversity of friends I had outside the church walls.

Diversity could look like different cultures, ethnicities, and LGBTQ communities who are gathered together in a particular place and time. This composition of diverse groups could be seen in day to day encounters in the communities we live in and interact with. Sadly the church has not done a very good job of having a diverse community. In his lecture at Western Michigan University, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King observed that, "the church is still the most segregated major institution in America. At 11:00 on Sunday morning when we stand and sing and Christ has no east or west, we stand at the most segregated hour in this nation. This is tragic."

Not much has changed since 1963. A survey conducted by Lifeway research published in 2014 explained that "Most (86 percent) say their congregation is predominantly one racial or ethnic group." In this research it explains how congregates and pastors say, "churches should reflect the diversity of their communities." But we are not always aware of the diversity in our communities.

Sometimes, do you feel we forget or overlook the diversity God created? In our Christian faith, we are reminded to know and live out what it means to be Christian in a diverse world. What does it mean that we are Christian among our community, our family, strangers, and with the very people we gather in fellowship together? That 2014 Lifeway research quotes a Pastor named Derwin Gray saying, “We shouldn’t long for racial diversity - we should long for the proclamation of Jesus, which creates ethnic diversity... The Apostle Paul didn’t start one church for Jews and one church of Gentiles in the New Testament. The Gospel brought people together.”

The issue in the church is the lack of diversity. Many churches become accustomed to engaging with a particular ethnic and racial specific community that defines the group. The church embraces this specific identity which creates an “us” and “them” mentality of other racial or ethnic groups which are then avoided. We know that’s bad. But how do we do better? What does an authentically diverse church look like?

How do we here at Catalyst pursue genuine, authentic diversity? How do we move beyond buzzwords, trends and tokenism? We must consider what diversity looks like in the community we are part of and how we can live out the diversity that is an essential part of Jesus’ good news, the very good news we are commissioned to carry out.

Turn with us to 1 Corinthians 1:2-10.

Paul writes this letter to the churches gathering in Corinth. They have written to him of certain issues that are going on in the gathering places in Corinth. Paul could have easily addressed these issues authoritatively, but he begins his letter with reminding the people who they are. Paul established this church in Corinth and this church was established by him proclaiming Christ crucified. When you read through 1 Corinthians, this is a constant reminder when Paul is addressing the issues the people wrote to him. To address the issue of diversity, Catalyst, think about if there is a dominant racial or ethnic group whose cultural practice and identity defines this gathered space. Before Paul addresses the issues of the church, he reminds the people who they are. Before we can address the issue of diversity within the church, remember who you are. Reflect on who you are as being made in the image of God. Next, envision how Catalyst can move toward creating a diverse space here. Lastly, discern where God is leading Catalyst to live out diversity in the world around us.

I’m reading from the First Nations Version today:

I

“To the members of Creator’s sacred family who gather in Village of Pleasure (Corinth). I write to you, the ones who have been made holy in harmony with the Chosen One, Creator Sets Free (Jesus), who have been chosen to walk the road of life with him in a sacred manner. I also write this to all people everywhere who call out to and put their trust in Creator Sets Free (Jesus) our Honored Chief and all that his name represents. He is their Honored Chief and ours. Great kindness and peace to you from our Father the Great Spirit and from our Honored Chief Creator Sets Free (Jesus), the Chosen One.

The issue of diversity cannot be addressed with me telling you what to do to be diverse. Authentic diversity isn’t something we can legislate. Instead, Paul reminds the church in Corinth who they are

because of Jesus. Diversity begins with us being called to reflect who we are because of Jesus Christ. We are each made in the image of God. We each have cultural and ethnic identities that have shaped our life experiences. This is a personal and communal connection. With this, Catalyst, remember that when we embrace our cultural and ethnic identities, we are embracing our way of life in Jesus Christ.

How do we embrace our cultural and ethnic identities *for* Jesus?

We need to be aware of our identity as the church of God. Paul begins 1 Corinthians by reminding the people who they are as the Church. The church is the diverse people gathered together and have a collective identity. Each of us has a ethnic and cultural identity that has a different history and tradition. I am Navajo, Diné, which means “The People.” I was raised on the Navajo Reservation in Arizona. My culture, traditions, and stories have been passed down from generation to generation. Who I am as a Diné woman is not taken away because I am a Christian. Your ethnic and cultural identity is not taken away because you are a Christian. Instead, I get to bring my unique experiences and perspectives, my culture and traditions to the Church.

Our common history and common tradition is Jesus. We are now gathered at this point of time, to seek the direction of God’s story of how he has formed and shaped us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The expression of our identity should be embraced when we gather together in the church.

The people of the church are sanctified in Jesus Christ. We often think of salvation as a one-time event that happened to us - we ‘got saved’. But the New Testament understands salvation as an ongoing reality - our lives are constantly reshaped because of and by Jesus Christ. In his book *When Love Bends Down*, theologian Michael Lodahl discusses salvation as “denotes a healing, a restored wholeness, wellness, [and this salvation] God offers us in Jesus Christ is, in fact, a salving, a healing, of our whole person, of every dimension of our lives- spiritually, mental, emotional, relational, physical, everything! - in the hope that all of God’s good creation can be healed. -- Michael Lodahl, *Love Bends Down*”

The Church shares in this holistic salvation in Jesus Christ and also shares in the proclamation of the good news to live out the transforming power of God. Diversity in the church is lived out for the purpose of bringing about healing, restored wholeness, and wellness to the body of Christ, which is the church. Paul addresses the local Christian gathering and explains that we are part of a larger diverse body of people. Paul reminds us that we are “called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul’s reminder of who we are in the First Nations Version says, “I write to you, the ones who have been made holy in harmony with the Chosen One, Creator Sets Free (Jesus), who have been chosen to walk the road of life with him in a sacred manner. I also write this to all people everywhere who call out to and put their trust in Creator Sets Free (Jesus) our Honored Chief and all that his name represents. He is their Honored Chief and ours.” Paul reminds the church of how they were established and how their lives have been reshaped from their previous lifestyle and understanding. We are reminded of this very thing. It is a challenge of different people coming together, who all have different backgrounds. These differences should not divide us, bring about conflicts or discord. Yes, we can have conversations and be in disagreement, even debate; but these conversations should lead us to answer, “What does it mean to be a community who embraces diversity because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ?”

Diversity in the church is more than learning about different ethnic and marginalized groups. We want to respect the ethnic and marginalized group by not making them perform for us. What I mean by this, is don't just show up at events that highlight ethnic and marginalized groups. Think about the reason why you're attending that event and what has God called you to do beyond that event in regards to being a Christian in a diverse world. I have performed at events highlighting my culture. I have no problem with this. I can tell you from personal experience, I know when the group uses that event to appear diverse and they fulfilled their requirement for the year of highlighting diversity. Diversity in the church begins with our commitment to embrace people unlike ourselves as humans who are God's beloved.

II

Where do we go from there? Let's follow Paul further in 1 Corinthians:

I am always giving thanks to Creator for you, for the gift of his great kindness given to you in Creator Sets Free (Jesus), the Chosen One. He has blessed you with the right words to speak and a deep understanding of all things. So we can now be sure that your lives are telling the true story of the Chosen One. This shows that you have all the spiritual gifts you need as you wait with pounding hearts for the great revealing of our Honored Chief Creator Sets Free (Jesus), the Chosen One. He will keep your feet on solid ground and guide you to the end of the trail so that you will have a good reputation when the day comes for our Honored Chief Creator Sets Free (Jesus) the Chosen One to be revealed.

Creator can be fully trusted for these things, for he is the one who chose you to walk side by side with Creator Sets Free (Jesus), who is the Chosen One and our Honored Chief. My sacred family members, I come to you representing our Honored Chief Creator Sets Free (Jesus), the Chosen One. I am speaking to you from my heart with firm words. To keep the family from splitting into opposing groups, you must seek harmony with each other and speak with one voice. In this way, you will be joined together with one mind and purpose.” (FNV)

Paul reminds us over and over again of Jesus Christ and what is central in knowing and proclaiming the gospel. We have the grace of God that has been given to us in Christ Jesus. In the church Paul has established in Corinth, which is built on the foundation of Jesus Christ, and that God has given growth, there was a relational context in these small fellowships. There's not a percentage of diversity, but the church in Corinth likely reflected the diversity of the city's population. It is something to consider, does the church reflect the diversity of the community? The research study in 2018 by Lifeway research explains that there is a desire for churches to be diverse, but the church does not reflect their communities. Eighty one percent of churches still mostly consisted of one racial group. In 2020, Lifeway research report on race relations and what percentage of people groups are more likely to view the church as too segregated are: 46% of young adults, age 18-34; 38 % 50 and older, 52% of African Americans adults, 50% of Hispanics adults, and 38% of White adults.

Christian formation occurs in the life of the community. It is us being enriched in Jesus Christ, in speech, in knowledge, it is also in worship, fellowship and discipleship. It is where the called-out ones, the church, gather together to practice and partake of the different means of grace. The call to give witness of

the crucified Christ, is given in our testimony of Christ. This is our strength and we are given the spiritual gifts to do so. When we focus our testimony on Jesus Christ and him crucified, we are giving the different varieties of gifts, services, and activities, which all come from the same Spirit, the same Lord, and the same God. These gifts are not to be checked off, but are gifts that lift each person in the community up. These gifts are not for individual use or for someone to boast about. These gifts express the life of the Spirit in our lives. These are “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.” -- Galatians 5:22-26

Because of this, the people become the covenant community and are brought into the story of God. This is why Paul writes, to remind the people over and over again they belong to Christ, we belong to Christ. The center of our lives is called to give witness to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

III

As we look back, we see from the beginning we are still called, gathered, and sent into the world. I cannot make you or tell you where to begin with being diverse. It's not a requirement. Diversity is a call of witness of who we are because of Christ Jesus. My journey of diversity has changed. I have learned from my mistakes and continue to learn about how God calls me to welcome others who look differently than me. Recently, this has looked like learning more of the Palestinian people and listening to the family who own a local restaurant here in Kansas City, Missouri. I had to pray and understand the conflict between Israel and Palestinians. I've had many pastors tell me that I need to side with Israel because they are God's chosen people. But, I know what it's like when your culture is placed as the enemy of God and how justification of death and destruction is used in the name of God. This family has opened their doors in a community that is different from their own. Yet, you walk in their tiny restaurant and you are welcomed. I have seen how different ethnic and cultural groups eat here and have conversations with the family.

We can segregate and see others as the enemy when we choose not to hear the voice of the marginalized and minority. Stories are important and it makes space to hear the realities of racial and cultural identity, as well as the prejudices and injustice the people have faced or continue to face.

We can only learn so much from a book or cultural event. It is much different to journey in life together. God's kingdom is revealed and lived out by his disciples by experience of what has been made known of Christ with us and we are transformed from an individual to a community.

We return to the questions the church of Corinth were trying to figure out, and what we are called to as well in our Christian faith. We are reminded to know and live out what it means to be Christian in a diverse world? What does it mean that we are Christian among our community, our family, strangers, and with the very people we gather in fellowship together? The life of the church becomes the lived-out God at work in the world where we begin to bring renewal and restoration to the world. The church no longer tries to care for themselves or we no longer try to save ourselves. The church is not separate from each other's journey, but the church interacts with one another in relationships, holding each other accountable, and having conversations together. We see the hope in God and have found communion with God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. By this, we are able to say, “brothers and sisters, by the name

of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.”

Communion + Examen

Invitation to the Table

When in the last week has someone else's culture and identity helped me know God better?

When in the last week have I shown someone else God's love?

How can I show someone else God's love this week?

How can I be open to God through other people's culture and experiences this week?

Prayer

Assignment + Blessing